

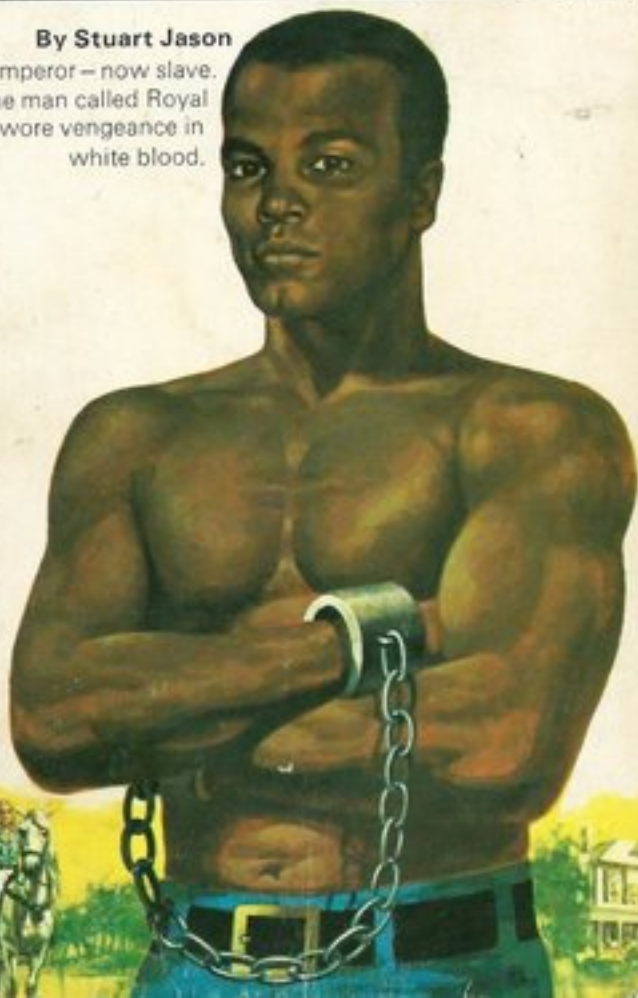
NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY



BLACK LORD

By Stuart Jason

Born emperor — now slave.
The man called Royal
swore vengeance in
white blood.



CALL TO FREEDOM!

Royal sprang to his feet, his instinct to fight almost too much to restrain—but the gun held on him was enough to cool even his hot temper. Little profit in dying, now—with his chosen queen at his side!

“Get down boy!” the overseer said, and Royal did so reluctantly, heaving as Slocum snapped chains around his wrists and ankles, locking him to the bed.

The overseer turned to Princess, lust firing his eyes. Royal stared helplessly, knowing that his queen was about to be ravaged by this white trash. He groaned as Slocum opened his pants.

“I’ll kill you, white man!” he called, in his native Mandinga. “I’ll kill you . . . now!”

BLACK REBEL

STUART JASON

LANCER BOOKS



NEW YORK



A LANCER BOOK

BLACK REBEL

BLACK LORD, Copyright © 1970 by Script Associates

BLACK MASTER, Copyright © 1970 by Script Associates

BLACK EMPEROR, Copyright © 1971 by Script Associates

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

PROLOGUE

HIS name now was Royal and he needed a wench. His body hungered and yearned and throbbed through all its mighty size and with every ounce of its tremendous strength for the warm, moist, tight inner recess of a wench.

A wench was a necessity—like water to drink, corn pone and fatback to eat, sleep in the buck pen on a wooden shelf. The need was even greater, at this moment, than his need to escape and return to Africa where, less than a year ago, he had been king of his tribe and new emperor of all Mandinga tribes on the middle plateau.

Tonight he must have a receptacle for his body saps. And he must have it soon or shame his manhood, his kingship, his royal blood, by spilling his vital forces upon the ground.

At this moment his manhood was humping his osnaburg breeches so it was hard to walk with his natural, springing lope through the black dawn. His master, Lee Hunnicutt, of Hunnicutt Hill, and the burly overseer, Sam Slocum, were in front of him. Behind him padded the two big black trustees Slocum kept at his beck and call to deal with unruly slaves and to wreak upon them any punishment he or the master might devise.

They moved slowly along the riverbank. There was only the light of the stars, which showed the levee humped against the sky and the dense wild growth in-

land as mere dark clumps. Slocum didn't carry a lantern, for they were going to a rendezvous aboard a slaver. This, Royal knew, was a vessel which transported captive blacks from Africa to sell illegally as slaves to the great tribe called Louisiana and the Hunnicutt Hill part called The Delta, in this year of 1852. As he himself had been smuggled in and sold less than a year ago.

Royal had learned such things as soon as he learned to speak the white men's language. He knew much now, taught him by the older and wiser slaves at Hunnicutt Hill, about this strange tribe of Louisiana, which was joined to many other tribes, the whole being named America.

But he did not know why he was being brought along tonight.

Until recently the master had kept him busy—nights, covering wenches and days, learning to make shoes under old Silas, the plantation bootmaker, and cutting down trees, and running several miles every day to keep his body strong. Yet for a month now, Royal had been locked at night into a buck-pen and spanceled hand and foot. And though many of the bucks had been taken out to cover wenches, he had not been chosen.

Each night it was harder to bear. His sap rose and pussied and ached, and there was no release. He was accustomed to pleasuring wenches five times a week, locked into a stud-cabin with a wench, rousing her throughout the night to accommodate his strong and recurrent need.

Think as he would, Royal could not understand why he had not been given a wench in thirty nights. It was better when he could keep his thoughts off wenches altogether, but his need had now got so urgent, he couldn't think about much else, and he didn't know if he could hold out until they reached the slaver. And he couldn't begin to guess what the master would have Slocum do to punish him if he didn't hold out.

He dared not ask why he wasn't put to wenchies. The way things were on plantations, which were actually tribes headed by white men called masters and overseers, no telling what they'd do to him if he asked such a bold question.

As he walked, stirring that painfully passionate hump at his center, Royal could smell his own musk.

The master smelled it, too.

He turned, waited for Royal. "Hold it, boy," he growled. "That's powahful potent juice you got stored up, an' I aim to use evah drop wisely. Hold it, now. It ain' goin' be long befoah you got a harem of youah own to pestah. You on youah way to measuahed foah a harem of wenchies, a puhsonal harem, boy!"

A sudden breeze stirred the muggy June darkness, carrying a heavy stench and slapping it into their faces.

"An' theah's the slavah . . . dead ahead!" exclaimed the master. "If you can't see it, you shuah as hell kin smell it!"

"I'd think that stink's carry on the breeze and the authorities'd smell the slaver's here!" Slocum responded. "Phew! Ever' time I git a whiff of it, it's worse'n it was last time I smelt it!"

A powerful figure, black in the predawn darkness, loomed suddenly in their path. "Who be ye?" a voice growled.

"Hunnicutt," the master replied. "Captain Delft is expectin' me."

CHAPTER 1

THEY boarded the brig *Carita*, Hunnicutt first, then Royal and the trusties, Happ and Bone, then Slocum. Royal had last set foot on a vessel when he himself was a captive, but he had not forgotten the slow, eager pulse of the hull riding high against the surge of the Mississippi. Now, when he looked up through the rigging to the black sky with its glitter beyond the royal spars, and when he'd filled himself with the stench of black bodies and urine and feces, which made his belly roll, he knew this was the same slaver.

A thrill of pure terror shuddered through him, though he stood unmoving. The terror entered the hump inside his breeches, reducing it to its normal size, which still was large.

Had the master brought him here to sell him back to the brutal captain? Had his talk of a harem been merely a trick to get Royal aboard without resistance?

"This way," said the the seaman who had met them ashore. "The cap'n wants that yer blacks stay below-decks, out of sight."

"Fine," the master agreed. "The big black—Royal—goes into the captain's quahtahs with me foah a vital reason. My ovahseeah, too. The othehs kin wait outside the quahtahs foah us."

They dropped down the after hatch, Royal close behind them. In the companionway, he had to stoop to avoid striking his head on the overhead oak beams.

There were four small cabins in the stern and what Royal knew to be a slops chamber, though he had never been in this section of the brig on that horrible voyage from Africa nine months ago. He had been hidden in the hold as others were now, lying spoon-fashion and naked between two other naked bucks, chained to the eyebolts and rods fastened securely to the *Carita's* inner timbers. There had been two hundred of them in the hold and another two hundred chained to shelves on the slave decks.

For all the grueling months of the voyage, he had breathed first what was left of the lime used to scrub the filthy hold before the voyage, and the kegs of wine vinegar and soda water used to help the sweetening process, then later nothing but stink. The stench of former slave cargoes had not left the hold, would never leave it. And during their voyage, Royal and his fellow captives had added their sweat and urine and excrement and vomit to the stench, and he knew tonight, standing outside the captain's quarters, that his own stink and musk were still mixed into that of the present cargo, and would ever be so.

The seaman doubled his fist and banged on the captain's door. Under the lantern at the side of the companionway, he appeared broad-built and mean-faced. Royal remembered him well. He'd taken more than one vicious kick in the groin from that wide, rough-booted foot.

The captain roared from within—he never spoke but always roared—and the seaman pushed open the door.

Hunnicutt entered, tall and knife-thin, not yet thirty. The light shimmered on his brown hair and when he half turned it sharpened his thin features, especially the beaklike nose.

Red-haired Slocum, in his forties, went next, his freckles standing out bold and plain. His face couldn't hide its baseness from Royal, not even behind those open,

honest freckles. He was as rascally as the seaman, but in a calculating way, with more brain behind it, as Royal well knew. In his own fashion, Slocum was smarter than the master of Hunnicutt Hill.

Captain Delft, Dutch slaver, roared a welcome to Hunnicutt and Slocum, ignoring Royal, who used the opportunity to take a quick look around the captain's quarters. They were cramped, but there was a comfortable three-quarter bunk and a built-in chart table. There were three small lockers, a pivot board on which to eat meals, and an arms locker fastened by a huge brass lock.

There was a pivot chair bolted to the floor at the chart board. When the pivot table was in place, the chair served it also.

"Sit on the bunk, Mr. Hunnicutt!" roared the captain.

"You too, Slocum! Well, Daley . . . hell's bells, the black's in . . . shut the door, blast ye to hell and damnation!"

He poured three measures of rum, gave one cup to Hunnicutt, one to Slocum and kept one for himself. Lifting the cups in silent toast, the three downed the rum quickly.

Now the captain regarded Royal, who stood just inside the door, his head brushing against the oaken beams. His beady blue eyes sparkled up and down Royal, his bald head shone fiercely under the light, and his black beard moved.

"Did ye bring this buck to trade back to me, Mr. Hunnicutt?" he roared. "Five thousand's what ye paid me fer him last trip, and five thousand's all ye get from me in trade fer him! But I'm a man of my word . . . I'll take him off yer hands any time, like I said!"

"I reckon so," smiled the master in his tight-lipped way. "I reckon you would."

Royal's heart cringed. Surely the master wouldn't sell him back to this brute! Yet, there was the past month

when he'd not been put to the use for which he was purchased—covering wenches and making suckers. All his desire for a wench was now vanished; he felt that if he just didn't have to be sold back to Captain Delft he'd never again want a wench.

There was no understanding white men. Even the wise old slaves at Hunnicutt Hill agreed on that. They said, "'Bout de time you think you got de mastah figuahed out, he go on a tangent an' does de opposite to what he evah done befo'. An' dey ain' a blessed thing a black kin do 'bout it, 'cause he is de mastah's chattel."

There'd been nothing Royal could do about it when twice on that foul voyage he had been at the captain's mercy. Royal was manacled hand and foot, and those great fists sledged his face to a pulp for slight offenses. The first time Royal had said he was a king in Africa; the other time the captain had taken exception to the manner in which Royal carried himself—said that he walked like he was better than anybody else, that he loped and sprang instead of walking, that he acted like he thought he was a goddamned emperor or something.

"No," the master said at last, "I ain't sellin' Royal, Cap'n. An' I ain't tradin' him."

"Six-foot-seven," the captain roared, remembering, "two hundred and forty-five pounds . . . all muscle and power! Pure Mandingo . . . sable black with gold tones, making him mahogany color . . . a king he was! I let you steal me blind, getting him fer five thousand! So—you named him Royal, eh?"

"I did," the master replied. "An' I'm heah now to git him measured foah seven wenches . . . Mandingo an' Angola . . . did you bring me seven like I ordered when I bought this stud-buck?"

"Seven it is!" the captain roared. "They're washed and got their wool deloused and cut! What you doing, Mr.

Hunnicutt . . . providing a wench fer every night of the week fer this king-buck?"

"That's the size of it, Cap'n," the master said. "I've locked him into the bull-pen evah night foah a month, hans an' feet spanceled so's he couldn't git at his peckah, the othah bucks spanceled to theah bunks so's they couldn't he'p him out. He lippin' full of seed this minute. I bin savin' his seed so's when he gits his harem he kin dump it into a new wench evah night . . . that'll be an inspiration to him! An' I'll have me a crop of seven big new suckahs comin' along out of my fine new wenches plus the suckahs f'um the fifty-two wenches he done knocked up since I bought him off'n you. Then fifty-two done begun to drop theah suckahs . . . all boys so far . . . all jus' like Royall At two hunderd dollahs each, sayin' I was to sell 'em when they's dropped, I've a'ready moah than doubled my money on this stud. Come nine months f'um now, I aim to have fifty-nine suckahs on my plantation f'um him, with him a-sowin' a new crop on the fu'st wenches he knocked up."

The captain roared with laughter. "What are ye doing to me?" he roared. "Are ye trying to put me out of business? Are ye starting yerself a goddamned stud farm at Hunnicutt Hill so I can't sell you any more smuggled blacks?"

"That jus' what I'm doin'," the master admitted with his tight smile, "convertin' f'um sugah cane to stud fahm. That's wheah the money is. I got a ready-made mahket, with it bein' ag'in the United States law now foah slaves to be brought into the country an' sol', while it all right with slaves what is dropped heah to change han's foah money. I got it all planned out with Mistah Slocum. He got the blacks a-raisin' theah own grub an' makin' theah own cloes, though they always done that—but we re'lly self-sustainin' at Hunnicutt Hill a'ready, an' we goin' to buy up a lot of striplin's that's

foah feet six inches tall—fiel' size—an' keep 'em a spell an' begin sellin' 'em off, a certain nubah each yeah, foah income until ouah own home-grown crop commences to come off. But I'll still be buyin' striplin's f'um you, beginnin' tonight, as well as my new prime breedin' stock, both studs an' wenches, long as you run slaves, 'cause I want new blood reg'lah."

"Ye'll be buying from me till I'm in Davy Jones' locker, then!" roared the captain.

He strode to the cabin door, Royal getting out of his path in one great sidestep, and roared up the companion-way, "Get them Angola wenches here . . . on the double, damn ye to hell, ye lily-livered, slow-steppin' bastards!"

He turned back to Hunnicutt. "I've got seven hand-picked wenches fer ye," he said. "Three Angola, four Mandingo. All from the middle plateau of Africa."

"I don' want no wench f'um Royal's native tribe," the master said. "I reckon he really was king theah foah a spell—f'um when he was eighteen till he was twenty-one an' you took him. He twenty-two now. I don' want no tribe-wenches kowtowin' to him an' treatin' him like royalty. He nothin' but a niggah heah in Louisiana, an' soonah he gits that through his thick skull the bettah it'll be foah him. He got a mite too much spirit to suit me . . . still, I reckon I want some spirit bred into them suckahs to countahact some of the puore stinkin' niggah-laziness they got theah very bones lined with."

"Yer going to like these wenches," the captain roared. "They'll be the best ye've got. Ain't a one of the Mandingos from his original tribe . . . I kept away from that exact section this tripl'"

The cabin door opened and three wenches, naked for inspection, filed in. They walked with eyes downcast, breasts jiggling and swaying, their curved buttocks working delectably. One of them had breasts hanging almost to her waist.

Confronted with three nude wenches and reassured that he was not to be sold to the heartless Captain Delft, Royal felt his manhood give a great throb, then slowly and magnificently swell until it again strained the osnaburg of his breeches. The wenches, all three of them, were aware of him and his state, for their eyes slid to his center, lingered, fled. And each pair of eyes regarding the hump in his breeches was like a physical touch, making it grow still more.

"Look them over, Mr. Hunnicutt . . . Mr. Slocum!" the captain roared. "Feel their teeth, pinch their tits, hunt fer sores, poke into their asses—ye won't find one flaw in one of them, and ye won't find a louse! They don't even stink—they're just through being scrubbed and rinsed off with vinegar water!"

Hunnicutt at once took hold of the high, upstanding breasts of the first wench, rolled the nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, nodded approval when they stood up tall and hard. He felt down her ribs and buttocks, poked a finger up her rectum and felt around for any tenderness, then inserted two fingers into her vagina, exploring for her maidenhead.

"Not too rough, Mr. Hunnicutt!" roared the captain. "I took pains to get virgins, and I don't want no examination to break them on me!"

"I reckon this one's virgin," the master said, and began to peer into the wench's mouth, poking at her teeth.

"Sound as pearls, her teeth—all their teeth!" the captain said in his habitual roar.

Slocum had meanwhile examined a second wench and pronounced her fit. Hunnicutt gave her a cursory examination and agreed. Then together master and overseer began to poke and prod the third wench, the one with the sagging breasts.

"She ain't no virgin," Slocum announced, feeling into her private parts. "Big as a barn, too!"

Hunnicutt took his turn feeling. He motioned at the sagging breasts. "That tells she's even had a suckah," he said. "But jus' how it tells, I don' know." He looked at Royal speculatively, then said, "But hell, what's he know? He ain' but a niggah."

I could tell you, master, Royal thought, if it was permitted. Of course the Angola wench had borne a child. The Angolas had learned, long ago, that a mother could go about her work, could raise and gather food, carrying her child on her hip. The thing was to cut the proper muscle, let the breast drop in its sac almost to the waist, and the baby could suck while the mother worked. Royal could have told the master, too, that the Angolas were lazy and mild. But then the master considered all blacks lazy. And if Royal were to tell him that he did not wish to mingle his proud and royal Mandinga blood with that of a lazy Angola, he would be whipped and starved, maybe even executed for impertinence.

That was the way it was in the tribe of Louisiana. The chattel was not permitted to speak and say what he knew; the chattel dared not speak. He could only hold his counsel, do what he was told, plan in his heart what he would someday do for himself.

"So I made a mistake about that one wench being a virgin!" the captain roared. "I'm mad as hell at myself! But I got another Mandingo . . . she could fill out ye coffle of seven. That is if ye don't care if she's half whitel! She's a princess . . . the daughter of a white man that's king of a goddamned nigger tribel! How do ye like that?"

Royal's heart leaped. He stood very still, letting his face show nothing. Not even letting himself hope . . . or dread.

"I'll look at huh," Hunnicutt decided. "Light-skinned niggahs bring a premium price . . . though moah

black blood would be poahed into huh suckahs through Royal. But fust, I ain' finished with these, yet. I got to measuah Royal foah 'em!" He turned to Royal. "Shuck down, boy!"

Anxiously, Royal unfastened his breeches. His maleness sprang out and stood, quivering, at right angles to his belly. It was a mahogany colored staff rooted in the circle of black wool at his pelvis, and even as it quivered it grew and the tip stretched tight and shone in the light.

The three wenches were watching it, fascinated.

Royal's state was such at this point that he would pester anything, Angola or not.

"Lay down on the floah!" Hunnicutt ordered the two virgins.

Not yet understanding English, they stood motionless, staring at Royal's manhood.

Hunnicutt put his hands on the shoulder of one wench and pressed her flat on her back on the floor, and Slocum did the same with the other wench.

"Now see here!" roared the captain. "What in hell are ye going to do here?"

"I'm goin' to measuah my stud to theah privates," Hunnicutt said tightly. "You kin see foah youahse'f how big he is when he's stirred up an' full of seed . . . I don' wan' no wenches so small he teahs 'em up."

"How many did he tear up of the fifty-two he serviced on yer plantation?" roared Delft.

"Quite some," Hunnicutt assured him. "That's why, fum now on, evah wench bought foah Hunnicutt Hill got to fit this head stud-niggah. She got to be tight, but not too tight. I don' wan' no moah sore-assed, cryin' wenches . . . they all wan' Royal ag'in, an' I reckon once he stretches 'em, they won' be no moah trouble, but I prefuh to pick wenches that fit him propah when I'm buyin' new."

"He can't go pushing that peter into them virgins!" roared the captain. "They wouldn't be virgins no more, and ye wouldn't want to pay me a fair price!"

"He won' deflowah 'em," Hunnicutt assured the excited captain. "Wipe youahse'f off," he ordered Royal "Wipe off that drop of seed an' don' you dare lose anothe' until I make my deal. Once we git back to Hunnicutt Hill you kin spen' the entiah night with one of the wenches I'm buyin' you, but until that time comes, if you waste that seed I bin savin' a whole month, I'll cut youah peckah off an' feed it to the hawgs, so he'p mel"

"Yes, suh," Royal replied in the manner the old, wise slaves at Hunnicutt Hill had taught him. "I won't waste it, suh."

"Now," Hunnicutt ordered, "git down on youah knees a-straddled of this heah wench. That's it—careful that peckah, now—don' let it git out of control. Now—point it into huh, see if it goin' to fit. See if you kin pestah huh without tearin' huh or makin' huh sore. Be suah, 'cause if you misjudge, you'll git a lashin' foah it if I pay my good money foah a virgin you can't pestah without tearin' huh to ribbons."

"Yes, suh," Royal said over and over, "yes, suh." His arms quivering under strain of holding his hungry body in restraint, he aimed his swollen penis at the wench. When it touched her warm, virgin flesh, a great shudder rippled up his loins and quivered his arms anew, but he persevered, pushing gently between the lips of her womanhood, seeking—and finding—the entrance, going into it, all the way to her maidenhead.

Penis bobbing, he withdrew. "She fit me, mastah," he said.

"You pos'tive?"

"I'm pos'tive, mastah."

All his blood was pouring into his suffering penis, pounding there.

"Now," Hunnicutt ordered. "The othah one. Measuah with huh."

It was more difficult this time. His arms fairly danced on his hands, which pressed palm down against the floor, and his penis jerked with a will of its own. But he was master of his body; this he had been taught by the old king, his father, in Africa. Thus he lowered the throbbing, aching man-part of himself into the second virgin. She was tighter than the other and he wished he could throw caution to the winds, ram into her and pound away, but instead he probed . . . slowly, carefully, seekingly.

He got to his big feet fast, just in time.

"She fit too, mastah," he said. "I'm pos'tive."

"Fine," Hunnicutt said. Then, to the captain. "Stand the two virgins ag'in the wall. Git rid of the sag-titted one. Bring in the Mandingos an' we'll git on with ouah measurin'."

After further roarings from the captain, four naked Mandingo wenches filed in, their eyes half downcast but quickly finding Royal and his state and returning to him again and again.

They were not from his tribe, nor could he recall having seen them in any Mandinga tribe over which he had become emperor. And if any of them recognized him, she gave no sign.

They were his same color—rich mahogany. They were large boned and tall and strong, with wide-spaced, firm, young breasts and inviting mounds. They looked to be about fifteen and sixteen years old, a good mating age.

Now Royal was really beside himself, watching the master handle their breasts, rub their nipples, cup their sex mounds, put his fingers into their vaginas. He shifted from foot to foot, trying to control his manhood which still stood at right angles to his belly, bigger than ever.

Again Royal did the measuring—four titillating, well-

nigh unbearable times. Again—four times—he burned to almost-bursting when his engorged organ touched female flesh, these times with sweat pouring over his body, glistening it, he held back that vital sap as he was ordered. And each time he announced, his voice unsteady, “She fit me, mastah . . . I’m pos’tive.”

After Hunnicutt had ordered the four to stand with the Angola wenches to await the bargaining yet to come, he asked, “Wheah’s the othah one, Cap’n? The one that’s a princess . . . the one that’s half white?”

Captain Delft opened the cabin door and motioned.

The nude wench who entered with proud, smooth carriage was a beautiful mulattress with smooth tan skin, green eyes and a fall of gleaming auburn hair which touched her shoulders. There was no curl to the hair, only a deep, wide wave. She was almost six feet tall, with great, pure, high breasts, a waist that swept in and thighs which surged out, forming a cradle for her beckoning mound.

And this was a wench Royal knew, the one he had hoped yet feared to see here on the *Carita* when the base and brutal captain had spoken of a half-white Mandinga princess.

She was from a far-flung Mandinga tribe, one which had joined the association of tribes.

She was the girl he had seen once, and loved on sight, the one he had wanted to make his queen, Queen of all Mandinga-Land, back in Africa.

CHAPTER 2

HIS seed almost broke loose and spurted across the cabin to her. But he retained it, held it throbbing in his privates, held his breath like an iron rod in his chest, held his thundering blood in his ears.

She lifted her green eyes and they widened and took on a glint of hope. His own eyes, big and liquid and brown, hardened and bored back, warning: Give no sign . . . do not let the white men suspect we have seen each other before.

He watched the glint leave her eyes, but beyond that she gave no indication of their silent communication. She glanced at his manhood, which dipped and sprang despite his control, then stared at the floor as the other wenches were doing.

"Down, wench," the master ordered. "Flat on the floah."

Royal knew she understood; her white father reportedly had taught her white men's languages. He saw the flicker in her eyes as she half-lifted them to the master, but she made no move to obey. She stood motionless, those pure big breasts, lovelier than any Royal had ever seen, moving under her breathing. She was truly a princess, captive and helpless, yet gently proud.

He felt his muscles gather to leap to her, to catch her into his great arms and carry her off the ship, into the swamp, to rescue her. But he could not. Brave he was, for a king must be brave, and an emperor braver

still, but these men of Louisiana had guns and he would be shot down and killed and the princess would be at their mercy.

"Git huh in position," the master told Slocum.

The overseer put his freckled hands on the princess' shoulders and pushed. His dirt-colored eyes were on her breasts, his red lips hanging apart, a trace of spittle making them shine. There was a hump in his trousers. He bore the princess to the floor and for a long instant straddled her, that hump directly above her mound.

"Measuah huh, Royal," the master ordered, his voice suddenly bright. "Measuah true, boy," he warned. "I wan' no mistake with this one, foah suah!"

There was only one way he could oblige this time, and that was to endure it as the youths in his tribe were schooled to endure pain and torture. He took one springing step and now he, instead of Slocum, bestraddled the virgin mound. In youth he had learned to think to himself: I am Mandinga. I can bear any injury, any pain, the fire of torture, even the death stab, and there will be no shrinking of my body and no sound will pass my lips. I am master of my pain, of my tongue, of my mind.

Now he thought, Mandinga-fashion: There is no woman I cannot resist. I have put my man-part into these others and resisted. Now I can enter my part into this girl, into my princess, and I will withstand. I will not befoul her before these beasts, aboard this ship. There will be no quivering of my limbs, no seed will go from my body into hers, for I am master of my body.

He lowered himself, palms set on the floor, his arms, which held his weight, steady. His teeth were clamped, hips rigid. His part swelled, but did not jerk. When it touched her exquisite vaginal lips, some of the precious fluid escaped, seeped out through no lack of control, but simply an overflow from the fullness within.

She was going to be tighter than the others, and some

of them had been surprisingly tight. He pressed beyond the delicious lips and gently on until he touched her maidenhead. He would not tear her; when the moment came, he knew just how to enter. Slowly, using all his Mandinga control, he withdrew. He got to his feet, turgid and miserable.

"She fit, suh," he told the master. "I'm pos'tive."

"Don't you want to examine her?" roared Captain Delft.

"I'll do that nex'," the master said. "Royal, put youah breeches back on an' wait outside. Youah paht aboahd ship's ovah an' done with. Slocum, git him out an tuhn him ovah to Happ an' Bone."

Desire torturing him, Royal stood in the companionway with the two big trustees. They had nothing to say to him, nor he to them. Slocum would have their hides, Royal knew, if they dared to talk to a slave they were set to guard.

The seaman kept bringing naked striplings past, taking them into the captain's cabin. Every time the door opened, the captain's roar surged out, cut off when the door closed. Royal shifted on his feet, aching with desire, knowing he had to hold out through the master's selecting striplings, through the bargaining and until they were back at Hunnicutt Hill.

He saw the trustees eye his humped breeches and grin knowingly at each other.

"Some niggahs gits fu'st table," Happ said to Bone, and grinned more broadly. He was always grinning and happy, except when the master was displeased over something.

"Yeh, some niggahs gits good things fu'st evah time!" agreed Bone, who had a great, rugged body and an ugly, rugged face.

"Like wenches!" Happ added.

Inwardly Royal cringed, then burned with rage. He knew the master passed wenches on to Slocum after

Royal got them knocked up and that Slocum in turn passed them to the trustees before they were put into a breeding pen. It hadn't mattered to Royal before what happened to the wenches.

But now it was different. The princess was different. She was special. She was his. These blacks touched her once, he would kill them. Slocum touched her, Royal would kill him.

He studied the trustees with care. They were a breed apart in this tribe of Louisiana. They were jailors; they wielded the whip when the master so ordered; they were the executioners should the master order an execution.

There were no trustees in the Mandinga tribes. The nearest to it was when an unruly prisoner taken in war, one who refused to go the way of peace, tried to kill a warrior or two in the tribe which had captured him. Then the king was forced to order death, a quick death at the hands of the best spear-throwers, to protect the tribe.

Royal believed, as had his father, that torture had no place between men. But here it was different. These two trustees were black, blacker than Royal—they looked like Soosoos. They were slaves like Royal, but they would torture their own kind. Yet they, in turn, were locked in at night and if they did not please the master, could be flogged or sold.

Maybe that was why they had become trustees—because the master said; because they had to do it here or be sold to do it elsewhere, on a worse plantation. It could even be in Alabama where slaves never got enough to eat and died like flies from lung fever.

But these trustees he would kill also . . . if they touched his princess.

The cabin door burst suddenly open and Captain Delft stuck his head out. "Bring chains!" he bellowed at the mean-faced seaman who was coming from the far end of the companionway. "Me'n Mr. Hunnicutt have

closed a deal fer two dozen niggers! Step lively, Daley, ye bastard . . . I want to git the *Carita* down the Passes before full sun . . . on her way into the Gulf, fur from the law!"

Royal flattened himself against the wall as two chained coffles, twelve slaves in each, filed past. At a prod from Bone, Royal fell in behind the last wench in the second coffle.

The sweet, full musk of her—not stinking musk, but clean woman musk—would have told him who it was even in darkness. Now, by the lantern light, he could see how she walked like a princess, with a long, clean, smooth gliding stride, and how she held her head the way she had on the middle plateau. She was in captivity, but she was no captive, no "yes, massa," slave, nor ever would be.

He watched the play of her smooth, naked thighs as she walked, and the passion in him grew, but this time held itself in control, waiting, knowing that soon there would be repletion.

Ashore, Slocum led southward, carrying the bag which had held the gold. Happ went next, leading a coffle of naked striplings. Bone went next, leading the second coffle of five striplings and the harem of seven wenches. Royal stayed a distance behind the princess and Hunnicutt, whistling under his breath, bringing up the rear.

New Orleans was some ten miles to the north. There was no plantation house within hearing, yet they walked quietly and swiftly. There was scarcely a clank of the chains which connected the blacks, a chain running from the right wrist of each slave to the right wrist of the slave behind.

"Move it, Slocum," the master called quietly. "I want to git 'em locked away befoah light."

They moved so fast that even Royal could walk more naturally. He went at a springing half-lope, not bounding wildly, but his legs were so long and strong they

could move naturally only in this way. His stride, even held in check as now, was that of a giant which promised, if given full scope, to cover a league at a leap.

They were drawing near to Hunnicutt Hill. Royal could see the big house standing tall, its chimneys thrusting at the black dawn sky. He saw the heads in the coffle lift toward the house, and knew this was the first they had seen. For, though they had crossed an ocean and the ship must have sailed past cities at a distance, they had been chained together, spoon fashion, in the hold or on the slave shelves, and had seen nothing in the tribe of Louisiana.

The overseer fell back to walk beside the master. Royal could hear every word they said, though they spoke in low tones.

"Fine haul," Slocum commented. "You picked good."

"I always do," Hunnicutt replied. "This rounds me out to three hundred slaves, not countin' the suckahs f'um Royal that the wenches is goin' to be droppin' f'um now on. Nex' slavah comes along, I'll buy me up a biggah batch. I got quite a fahm heah, Slocum . . . an' I aim to keep addin' to it . . . blacks an' land both."

Royal did a quick mental comparison. He'd had three hundred warriors in his immediate tribe alone, and every warrior had his wife and together they had young. There had been nine hundred in his tribe, and he estimated the acreage over which he had ruled for the one tribe to be twice the size of this plantation. And he had become emperor of twelve other tribes and all their territories. His heritage thus was greater by far than that of his white master.

"Lock them striplin's in the new pen," he heard Hunnicutt tell Slocum. "An' the new wenches in the jail foah tonight. In the mornin', issue the striplin's osnaburg breeches an' the wenches osnaburg shifts."

They moved through the front gardens of Hunnicutt

Hill. Everything was wet with June dew, rife with honeysuckle. Suddenly, perhaps because they had climbed the gentle rise on which the house stood, everything was clearly visible in the gray-black of predawn.

The house, with galleries all around, upstairs and downstairs, a flight of wooden steps connecting them, was two-storied with an attic. It was painted such a sparkling white that it glowed even in the dusky dawn. Its green shutters looked black.

The grass caught wetly at Royal's great, free-striding feet. He watched the long black snake of chained slaves wind silently through the rose gardens at the rear of the house, through the rose hedge, past white-painted stable and the whipping post, which looked like a denuded cross, picturing himself as the tail of the snake.

They came into the slave quarters, laid out in three streets of white-painted, two-room family huts and longer buildings which were sucker-pens, stud-pens, wench-pens and stripling pens. The head of the new slaves were turning from one side to another, and their puzzlement and fear over not knowing what was going to happen to them exuded from them in musk. Once a sucker in a cabin wailed, and the voice of its mother came clearly to the black, chained snake as she soothed it quiet.

They came to a new building, so newly painted that its smell was sharp, and into it herded the striplings.

"You want me to spancel them?" Slocum asked.

"Evah last one of 'em," Hunnicutt replied. "On'y way to manage any niggah is by fo'ce. That's all any of 'em undahstan', an' these is fresh f'um Africa. They ain' none of 'em human, I'm sorry to say. Besides, they got very small brains."

Slocum snorted. "Good many seem to have brains enough to escape to the underground and git to the north," he said.

"That's the trouble," Hunnicutt agreed. "Unfo'tu-

nately, they got bettah brains than a ho'se or a dog, say. That's why we got to always be watchful. You spancel them striplin's good an' secure, Mistah Slocum, an' in two-three days we kin tell have we got some upcomin' fiel' han's or have we got a runnah or two."

Slocum and Happ went into the pen with the young slaves. Hunnicutt, along with Bone and the harem and Royal, moved on to the jail which, like all other buildings on the plantation, was painted white. It had a big, barred door and bars on the two small windows.

Royal watched how the princess looked back at the houses and knew she must be comparing them to the stone huts back on the middle plateau. He saw her look past the hail to the overseer's house, which was quite large, having four rooms. Beyond was the shoe-maker's shed, and farther on the blacksmith shop.

Spreading to the horizon in three directions were the pastures where cows and horses grazed, the swampy woods where the hogs foraged and fattened, and the fields where the slaves toiled to raise food. On the fourth side, beyond the levees, lay the great, rolling river called the Mississippi.

In high good humor, Hunnicutt ordered Bone: "Tuhn them wenches 'roun, boy! I wan' Royal to look his harem ovah cahfull I wan' him to git a real hahd-on inspectin' his own private, nekkid harem!"

Bone prodded one or two of the wenches and they all swung around to face Royal, eyes on his breeches. All but the princess. Her green eyes, looking as dark as the eyes of the others in the darkness of morning, were on his eyes.

He felt his man-part swell for her.

"You gittin' a hahd-on," Hunnicutt declared. "A big-gah one, I should say. Which one of the new wenches you wan' to pestah, boy? This time you doin' the pickin'," the master continued with, what for him, was joviality,

"an' you got a free han'. They all wan' you . . . evah wench sees you wants you."

Royal knew this was true. He had seen that want back in Africa; he had seen it on every wench at Hunnicutt Hill, even on two white ladies who had come to visit the master one day. Their faces showed nothing, but their eyes spoke. And it had frightened Royal.

"Well," the master prodded, "can't you make up youah min', or ain' you got enough min' to make up? You suah as hell can't pestah but one wench at a time, boy!"

Royal lifted his hand, indicated the princess.

"The princess, eh?" said the master. "You may have no brains, boy . . . but you got instinct. In a human bein', we'd call it taste. Huh name is to be 'Princess' . . . how you like that? 'Cause she was a princess back in Africa. Like I named you 'Royal' 'cause you was a king. I cotton to them names . . . long as you don' neithah one git uppity an' big-headed. Heah at Hunnicutt Hill you ain' but black niggah slaves, an' don' you evah fohgit it!"

"Yes, suh," Royal agreed, because that was what he must do.

"An' you teach Princess some white man's talk whilst you locked in with huh, heah?" Hunnicutt ordered. "I won' have no African lingo talked at Hunnicutt Hill!"

"Yes, suh," Royal agreed again.

Slocum and Happ were approaching, the striplings safely spanceled and locked into their pen. Slocum unbolted the jail door, put a key into the iron lock, removed it from the hasp.

"Unloosen Princess . . . she the mulatress," Hunnicutt told Slocum. "She the one Royal covahin' fu'st. Spancel the othahs in the jail. Make it fast. I don' know how long this boy's goin' to be able to hol' his juice, an' I wan' that fu'st full-strength to be pumped into the wench without fail."

Royal waited, blood thundering. Princess was search-

ing into his face, but he dared give no sign of assurance. She stood proudly and naked, her beautiful body strong and soft in the dawn.

At last the other wenches were in irons, the jail door was closed and barred. Hunnicutt led to a one-room cabin. This was Royal's stud-cabin, in which he had never slept alone.

Hunnicutt entered first and lit a lantern which stood on the big stone mantel. Slocum roughly propelled Princess in. Royal came last.

"Shut the doah," Hunnicutt ordered the overseer. "I don' want them trustees gittin' any moah worked up ovah this. You see theah breeches . . . reg'lah mountain at the centah. It won' do to let 'em watch . . . it bad enough they got to stan' outside knowin' what's goin' on. Aftah this, put 'em to a couple wenches to drain off they worst fiah, then spancel 'em in they own cabin. I don' want to give 'em no opportunity to git to thinkin' strong 'bout them six virgins in the jail. Them wenches enough to set even trustees to grabbin' theah balls."

The stud-cabin had a corn shuck mattress on the floor, the big rock fireplace, and two little windows. They were covered by gray morning, but it was the lantern light which showed Royal how Princess' nipples were standing straight up, with little puckers around them like she was chilled . . . or very frightened.

She moved as if to run from the cabin, and Hunnicutt pushed her roughly onto the mattress. She cried out softly. The corn shucks rattled as she landed, shoulders flat against the ticking, legs outflung.

"Go to it, boy!" Hunnicutt cried. "Go git it!"

Slocum cursed, low and fast.

Royal positioned himself between Princess' legs. The accidental touch of his fingers on her leg sent passion licking through him.

The white men were going to watch. They always watched when he busted a virgin. But now, after

touching Princess, Royal was so anxious, so overflowing, that he disregarded the white men's eyes. This was his beloved, and he was not ashamed to take her before the world.

Carefully he aimed between those delicious virgin lips, pressed gently in to the maiden head. A great shudder went through him and sweat poured from all his body, but he held steady. He caught his breath, and gently worked at her tightness, gently pushed and probed, further and further, feeling the tightness lessen and when it lessened, he threw his hips sharply toward her, and was into her depths and she was moving, wonderfully moving, and he with her as naturally as the winds moved the trees back on the middle plateau. And his strength poured into her, and she enwrapped him, tense and quivering in his arms. And when her moment of loveliness came she went warm and soft, and they lay on the shuck mattress, not remembering the white men.

"You are my queen," he breathed. "Queen of my hometribe, empress of Mandinga-Land. Later . . . on the middle plateau . . . we will drink the cup of yam wine for all to see. But tonight it is as if we had drunk it already!"

"What you moanin' about?" demanded Hunnicutt excitedly. "That was too sho't! Have anothah go at huh, boy!"

Vaguely hearing the white master, Royal moved to take his queen again, not because he was so ordered, but because he so desired.

This time they moved in smooth African rhythm, a music of love, and their bodies went tense as iron, moving still. Then, as they poured their joy together, they softened and cradled one another and were one.

And when the white men left, locking them in together, they lay talking . . . about how it was in Africa, from whence they were captured. And they longed together for the land of their blood. . . .

CHAPTER 3

IT was a high-lying land, back from the black man's country known as Angola and claimed by the Portuguese. These white Portuguese looked upon all blacks as inferior, as slaves, though upon them they industriously begot many mulatto sons and daughters.

Far back from Angola, which was on the coast, all along the middle plateau, the center of a series of plateaus and tablelands reaching elevations of four to seven thousand feet, dwelt the Mandinga, their name corrupted by the white men to Mandingo. Here reigned black men only—the great Fula complex of tribes and the only slightly lesser Mandinga which, in turn, subdivided into Saracotés, Bambaras, Jancancas, Soossos and Quissincas.

At eighteen, Royal, whose native name was Nimi, became youngest king of any Mandinga tribe, and youngest emperor, upon the death of his father, Nzinga, in battle with an Angola tribe. The Angolas were trying to capture Mandinga to sell as slaves.

Nzinga had taken under his protection numerous independent kinglets, had established a capital on the great, flat top of a mountain, and called it Mpanzu. From here, as chief king or emperor of a loose confederation of seven provinces, he had expanded his kindly empire in all directions, seeking peace and continued freedom for his people.

Nzinga had taught young Prince Nimi all he himself knew and had charged the wise old men of his imme-

diate tribe and those in other tribes, to impart to the youth all they knew. Among them, these old men taught Nimi to think, and he took joy in thought. The strong men in the tribes—the hunters and fishers and the men who could run and fight and withstand any pain or tribulation without a sign—these, too, imparted to the growing young prince what they knew. These strong men taught Nimi to use his body and in this he also took joy.

Thus, at eighteen, he could rule as his father had ruled. Wearing the traditional ceremonial robes made of bark, he stood before the great rectangular stone palace, surveyed the mass of subjects gathered to him, looked beyond them across the far-reaching plateau. Rising from the upper mountain sides were shrubby senecios, tree lobelias and thickets of bamboos.

Below, in the mountain forest, flourished the baobab, or monkey-bread tree and the branched euphorbia as well as the wine-palm, the oil-palm, and ebony and mahogany trees. Through the forest glided leopard and lion, slithered serpents, swung monkeys, grazed buffalo, trod the ostrich, darted a myriad of fish, birds and insects.

In patches cleared on the mountainsides grew yams, sweet potatoes, peanuts, millet and even the succulent watermelon. Before the many stone huts, rectangular like the palace, simmered and cooked many savory dishes, and at every fire roasted the greatest delicacy of all—parrot meat. Nothing less was considered fit for the young king-emperor on this day.

Nimi's heart swelled. This was his realm; these were his people. He willed himself to be worthy and wise and kind. He, a youth of eighteen, today was become father to over six thousand Mandinga. From this moment they would look to him as they had to Nzinga for leadership and protection and prosperity and wisdom.

The responsibility sent a tremor down his back, but he

held his shoulders straight and broad under the ceremonial robe of bark, held his head high and proud and let his eyes touch over the hundreds upon hundreds of silent, respectful subjects. They awaited his words of wisdom and assurance so they might store them in their hearts to provide them with happiness and security.

"My Mandinga," Nimi said, sending his low, full voice over the multitudes gathered to him. "Nimi will continue Nzinga's way. Nimi will gather all Mandinga tribes into one confederation, rule with justice and provide security from enemies, even as Nzinga, who gave his life to save ten of you from being sold into slavery."

He paused, his heart a thunder in him. Would they, after all, accept him—so young a man? They stood in silence, hordes of men and women and children, which was their way to show agreement and respect. Now the wise men and the elders were nodding. The younger men, who had not yet the right to nod before their superiors, stood straight and proud.

"Nzinga," he continued, "would permit no slave-trading by any Mandinga, not even captives taken in battle. Nimi will continue Nzinga's policy. Nimi has further a new policy which becomes Mandinga law at this saying." He paused again, so that all should listen deeply. "No slave-trading party," he said slowly, "shall from this moment cross Mandinga-Land. No slave-trading party shall set foot on one patch of Mandinga territory and escape death. For black man to take black man captive," he explained, his voice deepening and enriching, "for black man to sell his own kind to white traders for bars of copper, is not the Mandinga way. So Nimi has said, and so shall it be."

The multitudes sighed, the many as one, so softly that the sound stroked into Nimi's ears no louder than the rustling of leaves in a small breeze. The old ones were nodding, and the young ones looked bemused.

"Nimi will take a queen from among the princesses

of the tribes," the young emperor promised. "Not this year or next, but after he has brought other kinglets with many more Mandinga into the confederation, after all can say with truth that he is worthy of the proudest and most beautiful princess of all. She will be Nimi's one woman, even as Nzimba decreed long ago . . . one woman to one man. And she will give you a prince who will become emperor and lead the Mandinga to greater heights than Nzinga, greater than Nimi."

Again the sigh of silence and trust came into his ears, and Nimi was emperor. His eyes sought the very young, very beautiful mulatto princess with the red hair and green eyes. The green eyes looked into his, and Nimi hungered for her. Her name, he knew, was Jinga. She was almost bride age—thirteen—but she was the prize he could have only after he had earned her.

Even at the celebration and during the feasting, he did not indulge himself and speak to her. But once again, before the night ended, their eyes met and spoke the language of love.

Now, lying on the corn shuck mattress with her in his arms, Royal spoke of Mandinga-Land where they belonged. "We are thousands of miles across the ocean from our tribes," he told her.

"My father will be searching for me," Princess said. "He is a white man . . . a Dutchman . . . and he knows the ways of white men. He taught me to speak English and Dutch, as well as the tongue of our tribes."

"Your father is a fine king," Royal said. "Nzimba honored King Jan among the highest of kings."

"I would tell you of my father," Princess whispered.

"Tell," Royal murmured, knowing already the story of the Dutchman who had become king of a Mandinga tribe, knowing further that the girl had a need to tell, that it would be a comfort for her.

"When my father was very young," Princess recounted,

"he ran away from a place called Rotterdam, ran away to sea. He found himself on a ship that went to Angola to trade for black men and take them far away to be sold as slaves, as beasts to work in mines underground and never see the sun again as long as they should live. He was sickened when he saw black men thrown overboard at sea because they were sick, when he saw them thrown overboard when English ships pursued them because they had slaves aboard."

"The slavers do not count their losses in lives," Royal said, "but in gold."

"That is what my father learned," Princess agreed. "On his next voyage, the captain loaded six hundred black men and women onto the ship where there was scarcely room for five hundred. Then he ordered my father and two other seamen to go inland to an Angola tribe and buy twenty more slaves to load, and my father refused to take a human being into bondage."

"So the captain ordered him bound and carried to the foot of a mountain," Royal put in quietly. "And there he was beaten and left for dead."

"Yes, it is now a legend of our tribe," Princess said. "Also that Mbundu, then king of our tribe, adopted my father when his hunters brought him to the village. Mbundu's son, the prince, had been captured and taken away on my father's very ship."

"And later," Royal continued the legend, "he married Mbundu's daughter and himself became King Jan when Mbundu went to his fathers in death. And you were born . . . my princess . . . my queen."

"Because you are gone, my father is now emperor," Princess said. "Your cousin, Memba, is trying to rule your tribe, but he is young—only sixteen—and the burden is heavy on him."

"King Jan will guide him," Royal said, but he was sorely troubled. He belonged with his people, leading them in paths of wisdom and peace. Memba had

ever been impatient, unwilling to listen long to the wise old men of the tribe, wanting only to hunt or fish or smile at one of the girls of his tribe or of any other tribe.

"This hut we are in," asked Princess, "is it the same hut the white men live in? It is not as strong or as pretty as the stone huts in which my father's tribe live, or as the ones of your tribe."

"This is the hut slaves are kept in," Royal told her. "We are slaves now . . . you know that?"

"I know," she whispered.

"We must do what we are told," he continued. "Which means you are to pretend to learn to speak English . . . I have been ordered to teach you. And we must use the names the master has given us."

"But in our hearts we are Nimi and Jinga?"

"In our hearts, yes. But also in our hearts we are Royal and Princess, for that is our blood."

"That is how my father would say it," she murmured, moving in his arms, her long, sweet lines following the tall, strong lines of his body. "My father will come for me, Nimi. He will not permit that I should be a slave to any man."

"Your father does not know where to come," Royal told her gently. "He does not know to what part of the world you have been taken. Nor has he gold to pay his passage over the world to seek you."

"Then I will escape and return to him," she said, "and you must escape and return to your empire."

"To escape . . . to run . . . is foolhardy," Royal reasoned. "Since I have learned to speak English, I have had many talks with the wise men of the plantation tribe. They speak of dogs which track down run-away slaves, even in the swamp, where there is water to kill the spoor. Such dogs are kept on this plantation. They can find a man with their noses. The wise ones speak also of how many white men join to pursue run-away slaves and bring them back and punish them."

"How then can we get home?" asked Princess.

"There is a way—slow, but open and honorable."

"Then we will take that way?" she breathed.

"Already I have started," Royal said. "I am learning to make coverings for white men and slaves to wear on their feet. When I am proficient in this trade, I will persuade the master to lease me out in New Orleans."

"'Lease,' Nimi? 'New Orleans?'"

"New Orleans is a great village, larger than any Mandinga village. To 'lease' means the master will hire me to a white man in New Orleans to make foot coverings to sell. This man will pay the master much gold for my work, and he will also have gold for himself from the foot coverings."

"It is not simple," Princess said. "How will it help us?"

"I can make extra slippers and be paid the gold for my own—if the master agrees," Royal explained. "I will then buy myself from the master. When I am thus a free man, all the slippers I make will be my own to sell, and with this gold I will buy you and pay a ship captain to take us back to Mandinga-Land."

"But the master wants you to sire many babies so he can sell them," Princess argued. "I heard him say this."

"If I offer him enough gold . . . a great deal of gold," Royal said, "he may take it. He is very greedy."

"How long will all this take?"

"That I do not know," Royal admitted. "I have not yet learned the amount of work or time it will take to earn enough gold."

"It sounds not easy," she said.

"It is hard," he agreed. "But hardest of all, we must appear to obey the master in all things, for we have much at stake—regaining a kingdom, an empire far vaster than Hunnicutt Hill, than the whole tribe of Louisiana. To run away is a thing we will do only if all else fails."

"But our master will make you take other wives," she moaned, her hands tender on his face.

"They will not be wives," he said. "All blacks here are considered as animals."

"As lions?"

"No—as camels, perhaps. To work, to serve."

"But the other women," she sighed, "will taste of your body, which is mine."

"They will not matter," he assured her. "I will cover them only because I must. You are my queen—our son will be prince of Mandinga-Land."

CHAPTER 4

AS soon as Royal and the new wench mated the second time, Hunnicutt ordered Slocum to lock them in together and hotfooted for the plantation house. He was wild for a woman. His own organ was as unruly as Royal's had been on the way to the brig; now it was the master of Hunnicutt Hill who could scarcely walk, he was so bad off. He glanced up at the sky as he hurried. It was full dawn. Any moment pink would show, and shortly after that the June sun would begin to bear down on the Delta.

But before it did, Hunnicutt meant to be into his as yet undeflowered Yankee bride. Damn Frances and what she called her principles! It would serve her right if he bedded one of the new wenches, serve her right if he went straight to Belle's Pleasure Palace in New Orleans. But it was Frances, his cool blond beauty he hankered for—her aloofness, her cleanness, her fineness. A whole goddamned week since she'd come from Boston and married him, and still she was holding out!

She claimed he had failed to keep a promise he made her in Boston. He didn't recall any promise. If he had made it, then he'd been drunker than he'd realized.

Frances was still young, only twenty. She didn't suspect that he'd been drunk throughout their whirlwind courtship, for not only could he hold his liquor, but when in his cups he became the polished gentleman. She also didn't suspect that he had gone to Boston to find a wife precisely like herself.

He was twenty-nine, owned Hunnicutt Hill, had three pots of buried gold which amounted to more than sixty thousand dollars, and was ready to establish a family. He'd wanted a fine, blond beauty as wife. One who would be a cool, patrician hostess on the rare occasions he might wish to entertain. He wanted a cultured lady to whom he could turn for contrast from the dirty battle of daily struggle.

After rutting with a she-wench, after managing stinking, lazy blacks, after outwitting sharp sugar and slave dealers, even after he ended up in the arms of a whore, he wanted the lady in his home. Just as he already had his fine house to return to, clean and filled with the finest appointments and the best food and wine, he wanted the wife also.

Beyond this, he wanted sons. Not so many that the beauty of his wife would be impaired, but maybe three sons, all in the mold of their patrician mother.

What Lee Hunnicutt wanted, he got. Well, this morning he wanted to bust his bride. After she had a taste of man, she'd tame down. If she liked what she got, that would tame her, and if she didn't like it, that would also tame her. Not too much—not all the way—for then she'd lose her Yankee verve, but just enough to fill the role he was creating for her.

Suddenly enraged that he must tame her at all, suddenly hating all his world because of her stubbornness, he yanked open the back door and entered the mammoth kitchen quarters which extended the width of the house.

"So you fin'llly back!" exclaimed Ginger, the tall yellow cook. She straightened up from the wide fireplace, her starched gray dress and snowy apron crackling, an iron coffee pot in her hand. "I got youah coffee ready an' waitin'!"

Hunnicutt paused in midstride, wheeled. Helplessly, he felt all his rage turn on her. "What you mean," he

gritted, "so I got back an' you got coffee ready an' waitin'? What you mean talkin' to youah mastah that way, you ugly ol' wench?"

Ginger stood her ground, thin body rigid, her lined face tense. "Gingah don' mean nothin', Mastah Lee," she said. "I heard you goin' out in the dahk mornin' houahs, so I got up early an' fix you coffee . . . an' breakfus'—so's you kin have 'em whenever you comes in. That's all, Mastah Lee."

He stared at her, knowing he had to go through with this, now that he'd started it. He narrowed his eyes and his rage coursed through him so that he had to breathe deliberately to keep from striking the coffee pot out of her hands. "You jus' about impertinent, you know that, don' you?" he asked, icily quiet.

"If you say so, Mastah Lee," the Negress agreed, "F'um the time youah Papa give you to me to wet-nurse, an' all through youah little boy days when I 'us both cook an' nurse, I do my bes', Mastah Lee."

"I ain' havin' no skinny wench in huh fifties tradin' on the acci-dent that she was my nurse when I was too young to have any say-so," he said. "Or on the fact that she kin cook grub the way I like it! You wan' the whip?"

"I don' need the whip, Mastah Lee," the Negress said. "I keep my mouth shut when it the wrong time aftah this . . . when the mastah miserated 'bout somethin'."

"Bax aroun' yet?" Hunnicutt demanded impatiently.

"Not yet, Mastah Lee."

"I got my eye on him, too," Hunnicutt growled. "Mebbe he's bin butlah too damned long—since my Papa's time—an' mebbe you bin cook too long. It all depends on how you both do youah wohk an' how you conduct youahse'fs towahd me an' the new mistress."

"Yes, Mastah Lee."

"Tell Bax," Hunnicutt ordered. "Tell him no slave kin git impertinent or complacent heah. Mebbe it be best

if I sell you both off anyhow. Blacks git into the ah fifties ain' no good. Liable to up an' die on me, an' I'll be out all the yeahs you cost my Papa an' me in upkeep an' not git a penny back through sellin' you!"

Only half-hearing Ginger's dignified protestations, Hunnicutt strode into the hallway which divided the rooms of the house, two on each side, kitchen across the back. Only way to keep blacks under control, he was thinking angrily, was to be stern. Show them who's boss every minute.

He passed along the hallway, aware of the polished oak floors strewn with hand-hooked rugs in deep, jewel-tone red and walls paneled in mahogany painted white. All woodwork and every mantel upstairs and down, was of white-painted mahogany, all doors were rich red, polished mahogany.

There were two parlors on one side of the downstairs hallway, and on the other side a library and dining room. All were carpeted in red, draped in rose; the furniture was mahogany, solid, polished and treasured. The chandeliers were crystal, not ornate, but big and of the best.

Near the great, double front door stood a very tall old mahogany grandfather clock with brass weights and pendulum. Its face was illuminated with gold and the numbers were all of gold, as were the hands.

A graceful stairway curved up from the front of the hall, the steps carpeted in red, the risers and posts painted white, the railing rich red mahogany.

Upstairs were six bedchambers, each opening onto some portion of the encircling upstairs gallery by means of floor-length windows. Here again the deep red, rose and white were repeated. Here again was polished mahogany furniture.

"Evahthing at Hunnicutt Hill was the best to be foun' a generation ago," Hunnicutt had told Frances Demarest in Boston when he was courting her. "The house is big . . . it's a good solid house . . . but it ain' one

of the showplaces, and I don' want it to be. It's jus' the comfortable home of a man of pahts. I re'lize, how-evah, that a lady wishes to select huh own fuhniture placement, huh own colahs. So as fuhniture requiahs recovahing or new draperies are in ordah, or cahpet . . . you be free to imprint youah puhsonal taste on Hunnicutt Hill."

His bride, much to his satisfaction, had liked Hunnicutt Hill as it stood. And he, having seen some of the best Boston homes, sensed that there was a touch of Boston at Hunnicutt Hill in the solidity of the furniture and the exquisite care it had received over the years. This, perhaps, was why his bride said she was going to love the house.

Well, now she'll love me, Hunnicutt thought, making for her door, his passion rising. Love me or hate me . . . I don't give a damn which . . . but she'll sure-hell be aware of mel

Her room was at the front of the house. He knocked smartly at her door, waited without patience. There was no sound from within. Was she that deep a sleeper? How the hell would he know? He hadn't spent a night with her yet because of this promise he was supposed to have made and not fulfilled.

He turned the silver knob, pushed. The door was locked. He doubled his fist, pounded on the glowing mahogany. "Frances!" he called. "Frances, wake up!"

"Who is it?" she called sleepily, her voice with that silvery tone he liked so well.

"It's me . . . youah husban'!"

"What's wrong?" She didn't sound so drowsy now.

"Nothin' that I ain' goin' to remedy two minutes aftah I git in bed with you!" he told her boldly. "Open up!"

"No . . . I won't!" she cried. "And not like this, not on order, even after you keep your word . . . if you ever do keep your word"

He pounded again, demanded again.

"Go away," she called. "Do you want to make a fool of yourself before the servants? Do you want every one of your chattel slaves to know you can't get into your bride's bed? What will they think of you then, Lee?"

"Blacks can't think!" he yelled. "They got no brain to think *with*!"

"Well, that's even worse," said the silvery voice. "No brains, but they'll laugh because the master can't make the mistress dance to his tune! Well, I won't dance, Lee Hunnicutt . . . so just go get yourself a bed-wench or whatever it is you southern gentlemen do! I'm going to sleep late . . . don't bother me!"

Cursing, he turned and entered his own room, directly across the hall. Wally, his fat, sad-faced black valet, sat up sleepily on his pallet at the foot of the wide mahogany bed.

"Git up, you lazy niggah!" yelled Hunnicutt, knowing he was venting his rage on his valet, but not wanting to stop, indeed unable to stop. He pushed his foot against the black's fat belly. "What you up to, layin' roun' sleepin' when youah mastah needs you?"

"Wally wake, Mastah!" jabbered the slave. He scrambled to his feet, his belly shaking from the movement, his breeches and shirt parting company in the middle. "Wally undress Mastah, he'p him to bed! Mastah wan' sumpin to drink fo' he go to bed?"

Suddenly weary, still miserably tumescent, Hunnicutt dropped into the chair and permitted the valet to remove his shoes. The slave puffed and snorted, working across his big belly. He was over forty, but a wizard at cleaning and pressing and taking care of Hunnicutt. The master stood while the black unfastened his trousers, tugged them down and off.

Nude, he regarded his swollen organ, aware that Wally was studiously avoiding looking at it or suggesting, as he might have done in the past, that he bring up a bed wench for the master. I could have him bring up one

of those new wenches, he thought, but crawled heavily into bed and shut his eyes. He had little stomach for bedding black wenches; he's almost as soon take an animal in the fields most of the time—it would bring the same relief.

I could go to Lida, he thought. Lida adored him, for some crazy reason. But Lida was his cousin and sometimes that stopped him. She had wanted him to marry her, and instead he had gone to Boston and married himself a lady. He didn't know how Lida would receive him now, and he sure as hell wasn't in the mood to be kicked in the teeth again. Not today. Besides, he didn't want Lida. He wanted his bride.

Slocum locked the stud-cabin door on the Mandinga stud and the green-eyed wench, then looked after Hunnicutt, who was going for the house at a fast clip. Couldn't wait to get into his Boston bride, likely, after seeing the niggers go at it.

Slocum was raunchy himself from watching that red-headed wench wriggle and buck under that big stud. Way he busted her, so careful, she was good and tight. The bed wench Slocum currently had was big as a cow. She was always underfoot, cooking, acting like she thought she was one of them New Orleans *placées*, and she wasn't nothing but a black wench that had to be ordered to scrub daily to control her musk. Anything Slocum couldn't stomach, it was nigger musk.

He turned to his own cottage. The wench would have grub ready. His raunchiness made it hard to walk. He had to cover that green-eyed, big-titted Princess. He felt himself harden more; he could get so big, on occasion, that even that stud Royal wasn't a whole lot bigger.

Well, he decided, he'd mount the green-eyed one before night came again. Soon as Hunnicutt had time to tear into his bride and go to sleep, he'd do it. Hunnicutt'd have no way to find out—Royal wouldn't dare to tell. The master'd kill a slave for accusing a white

man of such a thing. And the wench couldn't tell because she couldn't even talk English. Besides, Slocum had seen that look between Royal and Princess on the brig—they'd known each other back in Africa. Let them get smart with him, and he'd hold that over their woolly heads. Only the wench's head wasn't woolly. His trousers grew downright tight there at the front.

Way tension'd been building on this plantation since Hunnicutt'd had a bride come to him on the steamboat a week ago, life was becoming very uncomfortable for Slocum. There was something wrong between Hunnicutt and his crisp-talking, good-looking Boston Bride. He took it out on Slocum, ordering him around and not treating him the way his position as overseer called for, and Slocum didn't have but the damned burrheads to take it out on.

He was due some relief. In fact, he had to have it or he'd mess up his own big scheme. He'd been overseer at Hunnicutt Hill for two years now. He knew the master had three pots of buried gold. His scheme was to find out where the pots were buried, to steal the gold and lure that white trash beauty of a cousin of Hunnicutt's that he used for a bed-piece and thought nobody knew, to elope with him, get away from niggers and be somebody.

Meanwhile, he had this tension to ease and this hard-on to get rid of. Yep. The new red-headed wench'd do the job of relaxing him up brown.

CHAPTER 5

AFTER they had slept, Royal awoke with his man-part wanting Princess. She awoke too, and again they made love, alone this time, with no white man watching, and they pretended that they were together in their African honeymoon bower-house deep in the jungle.

At the peak of their delight, the cabin door slammed open and the overseer stomped in, snarling, "Git up offa that mattress, you damned, uppity, ruttin' Mandingo nigger!"

Royal's buttocks gave one last involuntary surge of exploding manhood, and then Slocum was kicking him brutally. "Git up, I told you . . . git up!" he snarled.

Royal sprang to his feet, his instinct to fight. The overseer was holding a pistol on him. Princess sat up, pushing her hair away from her face, green eyes wide with apprehension and also with anger.

Royal caught her eye warningly, and she dropped her gaze. But the white overseer did not miss the look.

He kicked the door shut, snapped the lock with one hand. "Lay on the bunk, boy," he ordered. "Flat on yer back."

Reluctantly, Royal did as he was told. He wanted to attack the overseer, to kill him for what he might do to Princess. But Slocum had only to pull the trigger, and all his plans for the return to Africa would be ended. So he stretched out on the bunk as well as he could,

for it was too short for him. The bare wood had splinters that were rough against his skin.

Slocum snapped chains around Royal's wrists and locked them to a stout wooden crosspiece at the head of the bunk shelf. He did the same with Royal's ankles at the foot of the shelf.

He laid the pistol on the mantel and turned to Princess, opening his trousers. As he approached the mattress, Princess sprang up and ran to the door. She was wrenching at the padlock when Slocum grabbed her and sent her reeling backward onto the mattress.

She landed so hard she bounced, then lay for an instant on her back. Slocum was on her, driving his rabid organ at her, before she could move. As it grazed the lips, she gave a strong twist, got out from under him, scrambled to her feet.

She was tearing at the padlock again when Slocum tackled her. He swung her about, drove his fist into her eye. She sank to the floor and he stood over her, waiting.

Royal's muscles strained until his body arched up from the bunk, the chains held. The cords in his neck knotted, his great, wide teeth ground together, and he struggled with the chains which still would not break. In Mandinga-tongue he moaned, "I'll kill you, white man . . . here . . . now . . ."

As if the sound of his voice had lifted her, Princess was off the floor. Silent, clawing, she attacked Slocum. She arched her fingers and raked at his face and neck, just missing them. This time when he hit her, she rocked back against the wall, grabbed his wrist and held on, then sank her teeth into his flesh.

Cursing, he hit her face and she let go. Panting, his fists going like pistons, he felled her. And like that, with her unconscious on the floor, Slocum took her, driving his organ in and out, cursing and whining as he reached release, rolling off and lying there, panting.

Royal's body lifted from the bunk, again and again. Suddenly he dropped the struggle and lay with great shudders coursing his length.

Slocum stood up, adjusted his trousers, lifted Princess and dropped her onto the mattress. She stirred, moaning.

"Next time act like a wench ought to act," he growled.

He unlocked the padlock, opened the door, thrust the pistol into his shirt so it was hidden. Sunlight poured onto the naked, moaning Princess. One eye was puffing shut, her upper lip was bleeding and already bruises were rising on her body.

Slocum had just unchained Royal, and Princess had painfully got to a sitting position, when the master, looking like a thundercloud, appeared in the doorway. He spied the marks and bruises on his new wench immediately.

"What happened heah, Slocum?" he demanded. "I felt uneasy . . . couldn't sleep . . . so came down heah. Can't I tuhn my back on this plantation without sumthin' goin' wrong?"

"This stud, he roughed the new wench up," Slocum said. "Just look at her!"

Royal heard Princess draw in her breath and risked a warning glance, and she remained silent.

"You put them mahks on this wench, boy?" the master demanded.

Royal said nothing. He dared not tell the master the truth, dared not accuse the white overseer. But neither could he demean his Mandinga blood, his royal blood, and say that he had beaten the princess.

So he stared stotically just past the master's face—the wise men of the plantation had warned him never to meet a white man's gaze, for that was considered insolent—and kept silent.

"You goin' answah me, boy?" Hunnicutt pressed.

"Yes suh," Royal said. "I answah, suh."

"You make them mahks on this wench?"

He had no resort but to resume the blank stare.

"What you know 'bout it?" the master asked the overseer.

"Not much," Slocum said. "I come up to look in and see if evah'thing was goin' all right, and this is what I found. Then you come along."

"Damn it to hell!" Hunnicutt raged. "If that ain' jus' like a niggah! Heah I make big plans, I buy a reg'lah harem foah this boy, an' what does he do? With seven wenches—seven virgins, min' you—to knock up, he man-han'les the very fu'st onel"

"There's no figgerin' a niggah, that's fer sure," Slocum agreed.

"Well, he got to be punished," Hunnicutt said angrily. "I don' like to put the lash to such a valuable black, but he ain' but a slave, an' he got to learn it once an' foah all. Aftah this, Slocum," he decreed, "evah time Royal covahs a wench you or me'll be present. I grant you, he ain' but a brute-animal, but I wouldn' let a stallion chew up a mare when he mounts huh."

He turned angrily to Royal. "You a *stud*, boy," he said fiercely. "That's youah puhpose. You much like a stallion, come down to it, but you have got a brain that's diff'runt f'um that of a stallion, thus you kin undahstan' why you bein' whipped an' learn f'um it, wheahas the stallion could not learn, thus would not be whipped foah chewin' up a mare. You undahstan', boy?"

"Yes, suh," Royal said, as he was expected to say.

He wondered how the master's neck would feel in his hands. He thought how pleasant it would be to crush the master's windpipe with his right hand as he crushed the overseer's windpipe with his left hand.

"I repeat," the master said, "That youah primary puhpose is to be a stud. I am havin' you learn a trade, true. But youah main puhpose now or evah is not the makin'

of shoes. Youah puhpose is makin' suckahs . . . nothin' else."

Royal kept looking blankly past the master's eyes, just missing them. "Yes, suh," he said.

His plans for buying freedom from this man had just been killed.

He had to find another way.

CHAPTER 6

HUNNICUTT stalked over to the mattress. "Stan' up!" he ordered, gesturing to show Princess what he meant.

Eyes downcast, she got to her feet and stood before him. He set his palms on the sides of her head and tipped her face this way and that. He touched the knob forming under one eye, examined her bleeding lip, looked at all her bruises, felt her legs and arms, examined her privates.

"Nothin' broke," he decided, "an' she ain' ripped f'um his petah. Which," he said fiercely to Royal, "is a good thing foah you, boy! If you'd ripped huh on top of all the othah things you done, I don' know if you'd live through the lashin' you goin' to git now!"

"You going to whip him this morning?" Slocum asked, surprised.

"No time like the present," Hunnicutt replied. "Give him his hidin' soon's he beats up the finest wench we evah had. That way he remembah . . . he got no time foah that niggah mind to fohgit. He know what he's bein' whipped foah, an' no mistake."

"You want him washed first?" Slocum asked.

"Oh, I reckon," Hunnicutt said impatiently. "Don' want no dirt cut into him with the whip an' have him festahin' an' not able to covah wenches. Send Bone to me at the stable, an' git Happ an' take the stud an' the wench both down to the rivah an' see they washes good all ovah. Lock the wench in the harem, an' bring the stud

to the stable. Meanwhile, I'll have Bone he'p Wink git things ready theah."

He turned on his heel and left the cabin, making for the stable. All his rages again came to a slow boil. Hell and damnation, every damned thing he'd put his hand to the last week had turned sour! His bride was holding out on him, and now his prize stud had beaten up his prize wench and he had to whip the dirty, stinking nigras!

Not that he had scruples about whipping. Like his father, he'd always used the whip when necessary. Blacks learned by the lash, no other way. It was just so damned much trouble when what he wanted was to give his bride a pestering she'd never forget. Maybe a touch of the whip would be good for her, take some of the defiance out of her. Just a week ago she'd stood before a preacher and promised to love and obey, and now look at her! He stomped into the stable, hot behind the ears.

Wink, the small and wiry stableman, was sweeping the puncheon floor space which would have served as carriageway if they had a carriage. "Mawning, Mastah Lee," he said, and began to wield the besom a bit more industriously—not much, but enough to acknowledge the inspiration the presence of the master gave him.

Hunnicutt's black stallion, Fury, whickered for attention, and Hunnicutt went to his stall and massaged his nose. The mares in the other stalls kept munching their corn, switching and stamping. Outside roosters crowed, and some hens began to cackle. Further off, he heard the hounds yelping in their pen back of the overseer's house.

"Wink, git me that jug of pimentade an' the crock an' a clean rag," Hunnicutt ordered, coming back to the center of the stable.

"You goin' whip Wink, Mastah?" quavered the slave. "What Wink do wrong, Mastah Lee? Wink sleep in the

stall nex' to the stallion evah night, nevah pestah a wench the mastah don' say pestah. He keep the stable swep' an' the horses all curried an' fed! If Wink done wrong, Mastah kin tell him how, an' he do right! Please don' whip Wink, Mastah Leel"

"Hell an' blast an' damnation!" yelled Hunnicutt.

The slave jumped backward and stood shaking.

"To heah you," Hunnicutt yelled on, "all I do is raw-hide my niggahs! That jus' shows the nigra mentality! You thu'ty yeahs ol', you nevah been whipped, an' I come in heah an' tell you to fetch the pimentade an' you jump to the conclusion that it's you I'm fixin' to whipl"

"Wink sorry, Mastah Lee," the slave said. "Wink jus' know he kin be whipped if he do wrong, that Mastah Lee firm on that whippin', an' Wink nevah suah is he doin' right or is he doin' wrong."

"I reckon not," Hunnicutt conceded wearily, "I reckon it's jus' the nigra brain. It kin go jus' so far an' it reaches its end. I ain' goin' whip you today, though I ain' promisin' 'bout tomorrow if you don' do right. Today it that Mandingo stud, that Royal."

He looked up at the center beam in the ceiling. "You put new ropes up like I tol' you?" he asked.

"Wink done that . . . new rope in evah pulley, mastah," the slave assured him hastily.

Hunnicutt eyed the three pulleys which were fastened about two feet apart on the center beam. "Git onto a box an' test them two end pulleys," he ordered. "Them's the ones I aim to use. See if you got 'em oiled an' workin' propah."

Wink brought a box from in front of the stalls and stood on it. He pulled first one rope, then the other, back and forth in the pulleys, and they worked easily.

"You kin git down now," Hunnicutt said. "Good thing foah you evahthing in the stable is wuhkin'."

"Yas, Mastah," nodded Wink stepping off the box. "Wink git that pimentadel"

He went trotting to the little boxed-off room which was used for storage, came trotting back with the jug and crock and rags, his face covered with a smile. Just glad to be in the master's good graces, Hunnicutt thought heavily. Not even sense enough to be sad because one of his own is going to get the lash. They ain't nothing but animals, they really ain't.

Wink set the crock on the box, laid the rags beside it, then worked the corncob stopper out of the narrow mouth of the jug. "Wink poah the pimentade, git it ready," he announced.

"Don' poah yet," Hunnicutt ordered. "Shake it good. Git the peppah up off the bottom an' mix it an' the salt through the turpentine good. Then git a curry comb to loosen the skin befoah you rub in the pimentade . . . I don' aim to skin him down too much with the strap. In fact, I ain' going' to use the strap . . . fetch me that new paddle instead. I ain' used a paddle in a long time."

While Wink hurried to the storeroom again, Bone showed up, moving in his lazy stride and before Hunnicutt got through berating him for being so long getting there, Slocum and Happ came through the barn doors, Royal between them. He was naked and clean, his great long legs carrying him through the sunlit double doors into the shadowed recesses of the vast interior.

"Shut them doahs, Happ," Hunnicutt ordered. "Don' want any of the blacks or anybody up at the house to heah this paddlin'. Nor anybody passin' on the rivah, eithah, when he yells an' laments. They might git the idea we cruel heah at Hunnicutt.

Happ obeyed and grayness and gloom settled over the cavernlike interior of the stable, closing out the sunlight which had streamed through the wide opening.

"Lay down on the floah undah them three pulleys,"

Hunnicutt told Royal, and the black complied. "On youah back . . . ovah that way moah." He reached up and pulled down the rope in the end pulley, made a loop in it and drew it tight around Royal's big ankle. "Now Bone," he said, "you pull."

Royal had had no expression on his face when he entered the stable, and there was no expression as Bone hauled him into the air, head down. He did surge along the floor with his hands and arms to keep his back off the splintery puncheons, and his fingers could still press the floor and take a small part of the tension off his ankle when Bone quit pulling and Hunnicutt said, "That's all . . . tie it up."

Now Hunnicutt looped the rope from the second end pulley and fastened it around Royal's other ankle and Bone pulled and tied it, thus splaying the black's legs to the greatest possible width.

"Throw youah weight on the stud, Mistah Slocum," Hunnicutt said, "make suah them ropes is strong enough to hol' even if he pitch aroun'."

The overseer grabbed Royal around the buttocks and flung his weight onto the suspended body. The two bodies swung heavily, the ropes creaking with newness. After a few swings Slocum dropped off and Royal continued to sway slowly, his fingertips touching the floor. "Reckon the ropes are strong, Mister Hunnicutt," Slocum said.

Now Hunnicutt took up one of the rags. "Open youah mouth," he told Royal. "Open it wide."

The black obeyed, and the master stuffed his mouth with rag. "You kin take it out, you wan' to tak youah fingahs off the floahs," he said. "Leave it in, it'll stifle youah cries."

Wink was back now with the paddle. "You wan' I should rub on some pimentade now, Mastah?" he asked.

"You wait. Got to whip him fu'st. I'll let you know

when," Hunnicutt said. "Give me that paddle . . . I wan' to see will it do."

He took the big paddle, which was brand new and made of sole leather with holes drilled through it, fastened to a sturdy handle. "I reckon you made this you'se'f down at the shoe shop," he told the suspended stud, whose upside down eyes stared past him expressionlessly. "It's pretty good paddle at that." He passed it to Happ. "Heah, you do the honahs."

Slocum ran his hands over Royal's belly and thighs, tested his buttocks. "He's hard . . . all muscle," he warned. "But Happ's got muscle hisself . . . he kin do the job."

"Now, stan' off f'um him," Hunnicutt instructed the trusty. "Aim foah his buttocks . . . don' hit his back, nuts . . . or in the belly. Kin you remembah all that an' whip him, too?"

"Yas suh, Mastah. I reckon I kin."

"I'll tell you when to commence an' when to quit," Hunnicutt said. He stepped back from the gently swaying body. There was an unrest in his stomach, which wasn't surprising considering the night he'd put in and the fact he'd had no breakfast. "Commence!" he ordered.

Happ stood spraddle-legged and raised his paddle, judging the distance from the hard black buttocks. He had an uncontrollable smile on his face, now that he was in charge of the paddling. He slapped Royal's bottom smartly, causing the dangling body to move. The next two spats set the body to swaying gently.

"That youah best?" Hunnicutt demanded. "You lost youah strength? Or mebbe-so you nevah had any strength!"

"I strongest niggah at Hunnicutt Hill, Mastah," protested Happ. "I jus' gittin' the feel of the paddle on this pahticlah niggah, Mastah."

"Royal's strongah than you, boy!" Hunnicutt gibed.

"Even now, hangin' head-down, you don' seem able to do moah than pet him with that paddle, boy!"

Happ now gave Royal a blow that swung him hard; on the backswing, then met the buttocks with a stronger blow. There was no sound from the hanging stud, not a moan from behind the rag in his mouth. His fingers clutched along the floor to ease his ankles.

Now the paddle fell at regular intervals, kept time with the deep and heavy beat of Hunnicutt's pulse. The pulse got into his privates and his organ began to swell and throb in time to the blows.

The smack of the heavy leather on the hard flesh made a deep slapping sound, as if the flesh were resilient. Hunnicutt knew the slave was holding his muscles taut against the blows. There were small cuts after the first twenty blows, and at last the flesh leaped through the holes in the paddle, carried on tiny spurts of blood. Hunnicutt's stomach turned over, and his organ humped in his trousers.

"Hold it a minute," he told Happ. On the pretense of letting the soundless, swaying Royal rest, Hunnicutt swallowed a few times to control his stomach, and clasped his hands together, pressing the front of his trousers flat. But he couldn't stop the dull, turgid throbbing.

Royal's body now ceased swinging altogether. The swaying weight had stretched the ropes, even though they were new, so that he could rest his knuckles on the puncheons and ease the cut of the rope into his ankles. Sweat was running down his body and neck and over his face, making it shine.

No one made a sound. How the hell could that bleeding stud hold back his moans? Hunnicutt took a deep breath. "Hit him some moah," he said. "Le's git it done with."

Happ resumed his beating. Hunnicutt knew the brief

respite had increased the pain, that the broken flesh had begun to grow sore. He wanted to stop the beating, but could not. He had to let his slaves and the overseer know that he carried through whatever he started. He had to show himself that he had courage enough to whip any nigra and every nigra that needed it. He wouldn't beat a horse this way, or a dog, but he would if the horse or the dog could learn from it as the nigra could learn.

Again the blows of the paddle joined with the pulse of his organ, and now he could hardly control it. Every time he ordered a whipping he had this same trouble, but always before he'd gone to Lida to dump it. And now he couldn't go to his white trash cousin because he had to prove to his bride that he was a man in bed as well as a man about the plantation.

As soon as he could, he stopped Happ, took the paddle from him and tossed it to Bone. "Clean it up an' put it on its hook in the stoahroom foah nex' time soon's we done heah," he ordered.

Bone had watched the whipping spellbound, his eyes white and delighted. He had no reason to hate Royal, but he enjoyed seeing another black beaten and gave no thought to the possibility that next time a black was strung by the ankles, his name might be Bone.

"No—poah on that pimentade," Hunnicutt told Wink. The stableman was standing with the crock ready, dabbling a rag in the sticky mixture.

Hunnicutt would have dispensed with the application of the fiery, smarting pimentade if he could. However, it was the only thing he knew that would heal the broken flesh and leave no scars. He did not want to torture the slave he had ordered beaten, but this much of torture was necessary to heal the damage.

Wink applied the dripping rag industriously, squeezing it across Royal's raw and bleeding buttocks. When

the first wave of pimentade found its mark, the stud's mighty body gave a great writhing motion and he lost his purchase on the floor and swung heavily. His eyes were closed, there was still no expression on his face, and not the first sound came from behind the rag in his mouth. His jaws looked like iron biting down on the rag, and great cords stood on his neck as he regained his knuckle posture on the puncheons.

Hunnicutt felt a thrill of angry admiration for the slave's endurance, then thought, he ain't human, that's all. A human being couldn't stand it at all. He ain't as easy hurt as the gen'ral run of nigra, either—at least they yell.

Nevertheless, Hunnicutt himself untied the pulley ropes supporting Royal on his shoulders, Slocum springing to help him, until they had the great, silent black on his feet. Now the stud spat out the wet, chewed rag and it fell to the floor.

Wink laved pimentade over the bloody bottom. Royal stood like a statue carved from polished mahogany, jaw rigid. His breathing was slow and deep; every time his flat belly sucked in, Hunnicutt felt that strong throb in his organ. The sticky pimentade ran into raw flesh and blood, mixed with the blood and ran down the great red-brown legs.

When the last of the pimentade was gone, when its trail of fire had blazed through his mangled flesh, Royal gave one shuddering sigh and his rigid, carven body relaxed. He stood, making no move, looking just past the master.

"You blacks," Hunnicutt said harshly, "you Wink an' Happ an' Bone . . . pass the wohd what happens to niggahs at Hunnicutt Hill that don' behave . . . in case any of 'em is about to fohgit. Mistah Slocum," he continued, "lock the stud in the stud-cabin. Tonight we'll put him to the second wench, no mattah what he

feels like. He got seed aplenty in him, an' I aim to git the good of it now, while it strong f'm bein' stoahed up."

Then, as in dire straits as he'd been earlier, and as filled with seed as Royal, he grabbed a riding whip off the stable wall and went toward the house as fast as he could walk.

CHAPTER 7

GINGER was moving between kitchen and dining room, carrying platters of ham and eggs and bowls of grits and red-eye gravy to the table when he charged through the kitchen. He was aware that she looked at him out of the ends of her eyes, but she ventured no word to him.

He took the stairs three at a time, coming to a stop at Frances' door. He turned the knob and pushed; it was still locked. He felt the flames of rage behind his ears, and hammered on the door with the handle of the whip. "Frances!" he yelled. "Open up!"

"Go away," the silver-toned voice called calmly. "I'm dressing for breakfast. You'd better get ready yourself. I told Ginger to have it on the table at seven sharp."

"Damn you!" he yelled. "I'm youah husban'! I got a right in that room, an' I'm comin' in theah if I have to break in!"

"When you keep your promise," she called back, "and not one instant sooner!"

"I nevah made any promisel" he stormed. "Open up or I'll break in—an' that is a real promisel"

"Break in, then!" she cried.

He backed off from the door and regarded it. Three inches of solid mahogany, it was too big a challenge. So he made for the floor-length window at the end of the hallway, stepped through and raced around the gallery to her room, which had windows facing both

south and east. The South windows were closed, and as he rounded the corner, she was closing and locking the second window on the east.

"Damn you!" he yelled, drew back his arm and drove the whip handle into the window. She uttered a small cry as the glass shattered, and then he was reaching through, turning the lock, raising the window and stepping into her chamber.

She stood in the center of the carpet, slim and shapely in a thin dainty dress the shade of her eyes. Even in rage he noted how the gathered skirt clung to her figure and fell only to the ankles, though her formal dresses stood wide over starched petticoats and touched the floor.

"So you finally kept one promise," she said quietly. "You broke in."

He stood gripping the whip, glaring her over—the blond hair worn smooth and parted, with a long knot at the back and a few curls at the side. He glared at the milky skin, the lovely, patrician features, especially the pink and shapely lips and the stubborn tilt to the chin.

"What promise?" he demanded. "What goddamned promise you all the time bellyachin' about?" He knew full well, but was so enraged, roused to fever pitch and frustrated, he wanted to put her through the ordeal of making her incredible demands over and over again.

"This is the last time I'll ever say it, Lee Hunnicutt," she replied evenly. "In Boston, you promised that you would free your slaves and pay them wages. On that basis I agreed to marry you."

"An' now you tryin' to hol' me to it!"

"I am holding you to it, Lee," she said quietly.

"I don' remembah any such promise," he said fiercely and truthfully. "If I did make such a witless promise, I was eithah drunk or undah some kin' of spell you put on me!"

"Then you don't intend to keep it at all?" she asked coolly.

"How kin I?" he cried. "Heah I am, convertin' f'um sugah cane to stud fahmin' . . ."

"Yes," she broke in. "Ginger told me when she brought my tea that you bought seven new girls for that big Negro, Royal. Is that true, Lee?"

"It suah as hell is true!" Hunnicutt retorted. "I'm fixin' to produce the finest slaves to be foun' on the market a few yeahs f'um now, an' you want me to throw it all ovah—sell my blacks an' pay them wages! How fah'd I git, runnin' a stud fahm like that? S'pose you tell me!"

"And Ginger said you were whipping Royal," she pressed. "Why, Lee . . . what did he do?"

"He mahked up the bes' wench on the plantation, that's what he done!" Hunnicutt yelled. "He acted like an animal—co'se he ain't but an animal, that's true—but his kin' of animal has got sense enough not to bust a wench in the nose an' split huh lip when he covahs huh! An' if he ain' got that sense, it kin be whipped into him! That wench my prop'ty, damn it to hell, an' he's my prop'ty an' he suah as hell is goin' to treat my prop'ty decent! Or I'll take it out of his hide!"

"Like you did this morning," she said flatly.

"Like I jus' this minute finished doin' . . . like I may very well do to that goddamned Gingahl!" he raged. "She ain' nothin' but a blabbah-mouth—blab this, blab that. Why in hell she tellin' you all this, anyhow?"

"I heard you go out, Lee. I went onto the upstairs back gallery and saw the overseer and the Negroes go into the stable. I asked Ginger. She had to tell me. She even knew why he was being whipped."

"That damn niggah grapevinel" he snapped. "The niggahs know evahthing befoah I know it myse'f!"

"You—actually mean to—give those seven girls to Royal?" she asked, voice trembling.

"Wenches—not girls!" he roared. "They ain' human, nevah fohgit that! Yes, I aim foah Royal to produce me hundreds of suckahs! On those wenches an' othahs! Further I'm going' to git me some sons on you . . . beginnin' as of now!"

She didn't flinch. "There is the matter of your promise," she reminded him.

"Even if I'd made it," he retorted, "you couldn't possibly expect me to keep it; it'd be ruination!"

"You'll not touch me," she said, "until you at least begin to fulfill your promise. If you'll free just one slave—any slave, even an old one—then I'll submit to you as your wife."

"So that's youah price now!" he raged. "Free a slave evah time I collect my husbandly rights! To hell with that! To hell with promises! Anthin's faiah in love, war, an' business! I'd have said anythin' in Boston to git you, jus' as I'll do anythin' now I have to do to git into you!"

"Anything except free a slave."

"Anythin'!" he shouted.

"Even rape," she said.

Half-mad with desire, maddened by her endless stubbornness, he grabbed her dress at the neck and yanked. The soft dimity ripped to the V point of the waist. He yanked again, and the skirt fell apart.

She stood with her head up, eyes glittering, daring him by her very attitude. He tore away the bodice of her dress and flung it away. He rent her undergarments from top to bottom with one mighty wrench, and she was naked.

Now she moved, darting for the armoire. As she reached for a garment, he swung the whip up and back, brought the lash whistling down. It smacked across her white shoulders and enwrapped one breast.

She screamed softly. He got only a flash of the perfection of her body—the delicate fullness of breasts, the insweep of waist, the curving thighs with the tuft of

shining blond curls at their heart, for she was running, naked for the window. He flung himself at her, caught her around the hips, and brought her crashing to the carpet.

Instantly he bestrode her, sat heavily on her thighs. He was breathing hard, more from anger than from exertion. She was panting, struggling to sit up. He slammed her back; her head thudded and the curls fell away from her cheeks.

Struggling and slamming her ever down in her silent, desperate fight, he fumbled his trousers open. "Damn you!" he said. "Be quiet!"

She seized his wrist in both hands, pulled it toward her, tried to sink her teeth into it. He slapped her hard in the mouth, slamming her head down still again.

"If rape is what you want," he panted, "rape is what you'll git!"

He pushed her legs roughly apart, aimed his swollen organ and lunged. She twisted, bumping him, and he slammed her flat with his thighs. Before she could move again, he drove mercilessly into her. He felt himself rip through her virginity, heard her small, moaning cry.

Out of control now, knowing he was hurting her, he began to pump. She tried again to wriggle away, and this drove him blindly to pump the harder. Every time he lunged she gave a moaning scream. He could no more control himself than he could hold back the river tide, and now it was hurting him too, but his tide crested and the muddied, rolling waters of passion spouted into her body, into her moans and soft screams, into her helpless gasping. And when his passion was spent he arose from her and saw that there were red stripes where the whip had lashed her.

His wild rage vanished and now his anger, deep and cold at himself for his treatment of his bride and at her for provoking such brutality, filled him. Unsatisfied

still—his release more pain than pleasure—yet blaming her, he wondered sickly, how am I better than an animal?

He helped her to her feet. She pulled free as soon as she got her balance. "If you ever touch me again," she told him, "I'll kill you! I'll murder you with my own hands!"

"Fum this moment," he replied, cold anger swiftly overriding regret, "you'll be locked in this chambah . . . jus' like a niggah wench. You'll be locked heah until I git you tamed. Until you quieten, jus' like a wench quietens. When she has to. The way you have to. When I'm done with you, you'll be a propah southanah's wife."

Adjusting his clothes, he went to the door, took the key from the lock, stepped into the hall and locked the door from outside. Swiftly he moved to the gallery and closed and barred the jalousied shutters of the south windows of her room. As he dropped the bar at one east window, she started coming through the other window, a robe flung about her nakedness. He shoved her back inside, slammed and barred the shutters.

Then he went running down the outside stairs.

Frances stood trembling in her darkened prison room. Her whole body pained; her woman parts were torn and hurt and burning. She had but one aching purpose.

And that was to escape her brutal bridegroom and Hunnicutt Hill and get back to Boston.

CHAPTER 8

HUNNICUTT charged out to the stable. "Saddle me up Fury!" he ordered Wink, who was again sweeping the puncheon floor as if a whipping had never occurred to interrupt the chore. He waited impatiently while the slave got the bridle onto the restive stallion, flung the saddle onto his satiny back and began to cinch it despite the prancing and snorting.

He mounted while the slave was leading the dancing steed into the lot, put him out the gate, rode him streaking down the back driveway, away from the river.

The early sun was cool under the breeze the racing stallion created. Hunnicutt could feel his beaklike nose cutting the breeze like the figurehead on a ship; his thin features were still and frozen by his cold, deep rage.

Past inlets and a bayou he streaked, past tall willows, soft cottonwoods, and hackberries with their purple dots. Past twisted oaks, banana plants, vines and creepers; past high, white, blossoming Spanish dagger, as he rode further from the river's edge. Here began the freshwater swamps, their shadowed liquids stained by dissolving vegetation, and here began the feather-leaved cypresses, and beyond, the wild cane-brakes, reeds and sedges and bulrushes higher than Hunnicutt's head, sawgrass that cut flesh like a razor, salt cane, alligator weeds and hundreds of other plants. Among the myriad greens showed the slender thrust of water lilies and the unexpected flare of purple iris. In this green wilderness

swarmed all manner of wild life—insects, lizards, black-birds, ducks, gulls, pouch-billed pelicans.

Hunnicutt looked at all this and did not see it. It had been his heritage; it was as common as the sky, the river, the blacks. Ahead, a mile and a quarter from the plantation house, sprawled the silvery-weathered cottage for which he was bound. It spread untidily on its own swampy tangle of ten acres, its southern border touching the northern boundary of Hunnicutt Hill.

Here lived Lee Hunnicutt's beautiful, white trash cousin, Lida Hunnicutt, issue of his father's younger, tubercular brother who had married beneath himself and had not lived long enough to regret it. Lida's slattern mother had also been dead for some years and the girl, already past her majority, eked out a living on her acres and what she could wheedle from her rich cousin.

She'd seen him coming, for she was standing bare-foot in her doorway, the sun striking through the faded cotton of her midcalf dress, showing her beautiful knees and thighs in outline. Hunnicutt felt an instant stir in his center, felt his rage increase, whet itself, anticipate. Here he had always unloaded his rages and his passion; here, no matter how he strove otherwise with New Orleans whores or Hunnicutt Hill wenches, he always, eventually, returned.

And Lida, damn her, knew this. And traded on it. And built her stubborn hopes and made her impossible demands.

He reined in and looked at her, rage and desire mounting.

She leaned gracefully against one side of the doorjamb, her other palm resting high on the opposite side, lifting her full breast, pushing its big nipple against the fabric of her dress. Her head was tilted to one side, that tawny, sun-streaked hair falling to her shoulders, the

tawny eyes with sun flecks dancing mockingly at him. Her smooth features, her arms and legs, were golden from the sun, and her lips were full and smiling and sweet. No matter how exasperated she got, she soon recovered that sweetness of mouth which enhanced the curve of the high-boned cheeks she'd got straight from her trashy mother.

"Mawnin', Cousin Lee," she drawled in her low, rich voice. "You the bes' comp'ny I kin have! Git off that Fury-beast an' come in!" Suddenly she ran flying to him through the sunlit breeze and, as he dismounted, threw herself into his arms. He let her fit her wonderful, pliant body to his and he put his wrathful, thin lips to hers and ground and bruised them with all his angers.

"Cousin Lee . . . dahlin' . . . my dahlin'!" she gasped under his brutal lips, sobbing with delight. "Lee . . . Lee . . ." she half-sang against his lips. "I nevah was so glad to see you!" She pushed back from him, and when he grabbed for her, gave him a firm shove. "No, you don't!" she cried with a flash of eye. "You ain' bin neah me foah a month . . . not since you tol' me you foun' you'self a Yankee bride! An' you ain' bin to see me since you mahhied huh, neithah! An' you ain' bin ridin' past even! I declah, I don' know whethah to let you hang aroun' or not . . . 'cept I'm as hung'ry as you are aftah ouah long separation."

"I'm hungry," he said, deliberately ignoring her meaning. "I didn' have breakfus', thanks to that blue-nose Yankee wife you mentioned, an' I'm stahvin'."

"I'll cook you some ham an' biscuit an' red-eye," she said. "I got coffee a-makin' now, so the fiah's built up an' hot . . . it won' take but a jiffy!"

She ran lithely into the house ahead of him and he followed, his eyes going over that nubile form he knew so well, displayed rather than hidden by the clinging dress she wore short to show her flashing bare legs.

"Now you set!" she cried, pulling out a rush-bottom chair at the wooden table. "You see how fas' I kin feed my man!"

He sprawled in the chair and watched her seductive, abandoned movements as she assembled ingredients and began to mix biscuit dough. She worked assiduously, the pink tip of her tongue thrusting out between her teeth, throwing him a provocative glance now and then, standing against the table so that it molded her dress over her mound.

Her very abandon fed his anger at Frances. This, coupled with the irresistible attraction his cousin had had for him since she was fourteen and he was twenty-five, led him now to acknowledge angrily to himself that her lure had built during the seven intervening years until she was as necessary to him as food or water or air.

Well, he had her, didn't he? He watched her cut the biscuits, popping them onto a sheet for baking. Had her right where he wanted her. Waiting for him in this shanty, which was plenty good enough, considering her white trash blood, with clothes to cover her and food enough to maintain her health and beauty. That she wanted more—much more—he did not for a moment forget. But, like all women, give her what she wanted, and she would be ruined.

Look at Frances. Take her from a life of genteel poverty, where her best lot would be that of governess to some rich woman's brat, give her a mansion and slaves and wealth, and she wanted to set the slaves free and beggar her husband! Give Lida what she wanted, and she'd withhold from him the thing he valued—she'd withhold her body to get her way about dozens of baubles and favors any female can dream up to crave.

"You wan' I should fix you some grits with youah red-eye?" Lida asked. "Or you wan' I should fix youah othah cravin', the big one?" She slanted her eyes at

him, boldly seductive in the way she knew drove him half-mad. She was the only woman who had ever roused his desire with just her eyes, and now all his unrequited, unslaked passion sprang back.

He was burning worse than he had burned watching Royal on the new wench, worse than during the whipping, than when he finally tore into his bride. "Come heah, you bitch!" he whispered and made for her.

She fled—through the sitting room, into her bedroom. Here she whipped off the dress and flung herself on the bed, rolled to her back, opened herself. "Oh, hurry dahlin'!" she moaned. "I'm half-crazy with wantin' . . . hurry . . . be rough . . . huht me . . . let me know youah heah!"

Ripping his trousers open, he speared violently into her and she cried out joyfully, smacked the soles of her feet on the bed and began to buck against his plunges, all but jolting him out of her depths each time her body struck his. He rode her mercilessly, pumping and grinding; she matched him thrust for thrust, crying out her delight. As they neared the crest, her movement grew more violent and faster. He felt her body go rigid and his own go rigid. Together, muscles taut to breaking, they reached the apex. Rigid and motionless, he loosed his rage into her and her dark moisture encompassed and healed him. Never did the joyous sound of her voice cease, not until the rigidity broke and they collapsed together.

She was the best woman he'd ever had in bed. Better than any whore at Belle's Pleasure Palace in New Orleans. Better than the most nubile wench. Better than the hottest, hungriest, most neglected wife of any neighbor.

Suddenly she jumped off the bed, raced for the kitchen, pulling her dress on. "The ham!" she cried, her voice still joyous. "It'll buhn!"

But it didn't burn. He sat at the table and ate the

succulent fried ham, ate a dozen big biscuits drenched in the red-eye gravy, drank two big cups of black, savory coffee. Lida sat across the table, adoring at first, but now with that look to her eyes—not seductive now—which meant she was going to start in on him.

"Cousin Lee," she said softly. "Lida needs money."

"What you need money foah?" he demanded lazily.

"I give you a gold piece las' time. You got grub aplenty, ain' you? Don' Slocum fetch you down ham an' flouah an' lahd an' greens an' such like?"

"I need coffee an' cho'clate," she said. "An' some new dresses."

Now he was getting riled. What the hell—never before had she mentioned dresses. She got a dress sometimes, but always out of whatever he gave her. She'd never asked right out for one.

"What the hell'd you do with a new dress you had one?" he demanded.

"Lee honey," she said, using her sweetest smile, her most reasonable, and most stubborn, tone. "You got that fine Boston wife all dress' up in silks an' satins an' fine Boston cotton. How you think I feel, stuck down heah in the swamp with nothin' but rags to weah?"

"You nevah fussed 'bout rags afoah."

"I nevah had competition afoah."

"It ain' a mattah of competition," he said impatiently.

"To me it is," she insisted stubbornly. "I got to ave two dresses as fine as anythin' she's got. An' a night-shift as pretty as any of huh's, an' a robe. An' slippahs."

"It's summah. You don' need shoes."

"She weahs shoes . . . don' she?"

"Hell an' damnation!" he yelled. "What's come ovah you?"

"You kin dig up one of them pots of gold," she coaxed.

"Don' talk crazy," he said.

"Oh, I know on'y time you dig up one of them pots

is when it's rainin'!" she teased. "Why is that, Cousin Lee? Is it 'cause you think nobody'll be out in the rain an' see you diggin'? An' so nobody'll know wheah you hide youah gold?"

"You used to be content with what I do foah you," he snapped. "Of a sudden, jus' let me git mahhied, an' you got to have this an' you got to have that, like you was the wifel"

"I ought to be the wife, Lee Hunnicutt, an' you know it!" she cried. Now her anger was blazing, and it heightened her beauty, added spice to her sweetness. "Youah so stingy, Cousin Lee," she continued more quietly. "You ought to have mahhied me yeahs ago. Cousins ain' such close kin. If I had you an' youah money, I'd buy such dresses, an' you'd buy me such jewels, no woman could evah be as beautiful as I'd bel! An' you know that's true! But no, you jus' keep me stuck away heah foah youah pleasuah an' convenience, an' if evah I mention I might mahhy somebody else, you have a fit an' say the man ain' good enough to mahhy a Hunnicutt!"

"That man youah referrin' to, that ho'se tradah, suah as hell was not good enough foah a Hunnicutt!" he retorted.

"How 'bout me?" she challenged. "You won' mahhy me account of my mothah! When it comes to mahhyin' me, you plumb fohgit I got any Hunnicutt blood! You treat me like a bitch-dog, an' I'm sick of it!"

He laughed, that sure-of-himself laugh that he knew she hated, yet which never failed to excite her. Instantly she threw herself upon him, warm and wild, and he carried her to the bedroom. They romped and went rigid, fell limp and trembling to rest, romped again.

She walked to the door with him, naked and pliable and his own Lida. He tucked two ten dollar gold pieces into her hand.

"It all I got on me," he said. "Buy a dress." Then he kissed her, roughly but with affection, and rode away, content.

Lida wandered back to the disheveled bedroom, tidied it, put on her dress again. She surveyed her shabby, immaculate surroundings unhappily.

All her threats and pleas had slid off him like water off a duck's back. Well, she had her plan. She'd follow him every time it rained—in fact, she'd been following him thus since before he went to Boston—and find out where he hid his three pots of gold and dig every one of them up.

Then she'd hide the gold where he could never find it. To get it back, Lee would have to divorce his Yankee wife and marry Lida. And if he wouldn't, then she'd take the gold and go to Mobile and live fancy and marry a handsome man.

Of course, no man could beat Lee in bed, but she didn't cotton to living on the fringe of his life any longer.

"Eithah I git him, or I git his money, or I git both," she said aloud. Smiling, she went to the kitchen to wash the dishes from his meal.

CHAPTER 9

FRANCES, locked in her darkened chamber, listened to Lee run down the outside stairs. When he was gone, she lighted two candelabra so she could see what she was doing, then poured cold water from the big pitcher on the washstand into the china bowl and bathed thoroughly. She hadn't cried. She wished she could cry, could melt this awful ice within, this terrible, untrembling calmness.

She held a candelabrum so that the light shone on her big mirror. The mark of the lash was red across her shoulders, down over her collar bone and around one breast.

Carefully she dressed, buttoning a blue chambray dress which had a tucked white yoke with an upstanding little collar. The gown hid any sign of the whip marks. Then she rolled the garments Lee had torn off her into a bundle, put it at the back of her armoire, and sat down to wait.

The big room seemed to close in on her. Why, this is how a slave feels! she thought suddenly. She began in that moment to understand why the slave acted a part for the master; it was a matter of survival.

All I want is to get away from Lee, she thought.

She had told him she would kill him if he laid hand on her. Yet the only way he would unlock her room was for her to change. And she could not change. To get away from him, then, she had to pretend, to

live a lie. Like the slave who secretly plotted to escape, once she got her husband to thinking she had tamed down as he put it, she'd take some of his money and go back to Boston.

It's impossible to be honest, she thought, to tell him I made a terrible mistake in marrying him. He is just stubborn—and cruel—enough to keep me locked up forever.

As the hours dragged, she recalled Lee's whirlwind Boston courtship. Her father, a Methodist preacher, had recently died, leaving her alone in the world and with no money.

She had gone to be interviewed by a certain Mrs. Meredith, wife of a wealthy sugar dealer, for position of governess to the two small Meredith girls. Lee Hunnicutt had been in Meredith's library closing a deal for his rather small sugar crop, had been introduced to the prospective new governess, and started his courtship on the spot.

"Let me escoht you to wheahevah youah goin'," he had implored in the presence of the Merediths.

"Why, I . . . " she had faltered, overpowered by his elegance and height, his thin, intense face and vital manner.

"Mr. Hunnicutt is highly respectable, miss . . . er . . ." Meredith had interposed.

"Miss Demarest," Frances supplied.

"Miss Demarest," repeated the financier. "You have my word that Mr. Hunnicutt is a safe escort."

Consequently, she had left the Meredith mansion with Lee. It was past five o'clock of a late May afternoon. Before they had walked two squares, the dashing plantation owner from the romantic south had persuaded her to have dinner with him.

"My deah Frances," he told her over a whiskey as she sipped a demitasse. "I am a man of action—a

buildah—an' I see no reason not to be puhfectly frank with you. I came to Boston foah two puhposes—to make a profitable deal foah my sugah cane, which I have done, an' to enjoy the comp'ny of a beautiful, cultuhed an' chahmin' no'thern lady, which I am now doin'. One who has intelligence an' appreciation foah the finah things—an' the finah people."

She felt her face glowing with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment. Yet, even in her excited state—for she had never before met a man who instantly by look, word, and gesture, told her he was bowled over by her charms—she sensed crudeness in him.

She smiled, heart going fast. "Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Hunnicutt," she said, "but—"

"Lee," he interrupted, leaning forward. "Honah bee . . . let me heah my name on youah lovely lips!"

She felt her face grow hotter. "Very well—Lee," she said. "I was about to say that southern women are renowned for their culture and graciousness."

"That is true," he agreed, permitting the waiter to refill his glass. "Howevah, to me a lady like youahse'f is the ideal. To fin' you is like findin' a jewel of great price. May I see you tomorrow, Frances—fohgive me, foah I am bold, but may I use youah name—it is almost as beautiful as you are."

Bemused, she nodded, bemused permitted him to hold her hand and even kiss it when they parted at her boarding house. Increasingly bemused, she saw him every day, fascinated at first, then infatuated and finally, when he declared himself and implored her to be his wife, she was so carried away she was incapable of refusing, especially after he fervently promised to free all his slaves.

When he left for the Delta, she promised to come by steamboat the first week in June and marry him there.

She still sensed his crudeness, even that he was poten-

tially cruel. But he was so positive, his speech was so different from that of Boston men, so charming, and he had promised to free his slaves, that she mistook the crudeness for mere lack of polish and the cruelty for strength.

Now, torn from his passion, striped from his whip, she recognized him for what he was—a man who did not mean to be selfish and cruel, but one who did what he must. A man who would ever wonder why others opposed him when his way was the only way. A man who could not change because he could not see the need for change.

She thought about the slave who had been whipped for hurting a wench and wondered if it entered Lee's mind that if Royal deserved punishment, so now did he.

She had seen Royal moving about the grounds. He was said to have been a king in Africa, and now he was in a slavery worse than her own. For when she escaped Hunnicutt Hill, no man could pursue and hunt her down with dogs. And the wench Royal was said to have hurt—she had been a princess. Frances wondered how those two felt about bondage, they with royal blood, who had been rulers and were now slaves.

That wench . . . that girl . . . that princess . . . she thought. I want to know her.

At noon Lee unlocked her door.

"My deah," he said, coldly gallant, "I am heah to escoht you to the dinnah table."

She placed her fingers on his proffered arm and went with him down the stairs and into the dining room. While they ate, he made conversation as if nothing had happened, and she responded coolly and politely.

He was surprised and mollified. "I am enjoyin' youah presence at table, dahlin'," he said evenly. "An' it pleasuahs me to tell you that while we eat, youah window glass is bein' replaced."

She inclined her head. "Thank you, Lee. I—have a request."

He looked at her keenly. "An' the request . . . what is it?"

"I wish to have the new . . . wench . . . the one called Princess, for my personal maid."

"I offahed you a puhsonal maid, an' you refused," he told her. "You have told me you'll have no chattel suhvant."

"I have reconsidered."

"This—reconsidahation," he asked slowly, "does it mean that you will no longah be a worry to me, that I need not lock you in youah chambah?"

"It does," she managed to reply evenly, heart lunging.

"I won' free Princess, you know."

"I still want her."

"Why? Why do you want this pahdiculah wench? You know I bought huh foah Royal to git suckahs on."

"I want her because she was a princess," Frances told him, "because I think she will be intelligent. Because she must be an individual, not just a cowed, frightened slave. Because I need someone to help me, and you said I might choose. Or are you going to break that promise . . . too?"

And I want her because I need a friend, her heart thudded secretly while she awaited his reply.

"My sweet," he said at last, icily, "of co'se you may have the wench. To serve you. It won' interfere with breedin' huh . . . soon's she drops a suckah I'll put it to a wet-nurse anyhow."

"Thank you," Frances said fiercely, because she must make such a response in return for his granting her request. But she hated him now, hated him for the first time, really hated this man who was her bridegroom.

She recalled the life Lee had promised her, one of

graciousness and ease, with the slaves freed, and compared it to this plotting and maneuvering she was forced into.

Suddenly she yearned to talk to Royal, to the king. After dinner Lee locked her again into her chamber.

"Jus' to make suah . . . jus' foah today," he said. "To make suah you won' change youah min.'"

Before he left, he promised to see her at supper . . . and at bedtime.

CHAPTER 10

IN the jail, Royal lay on his belly, face to the wall. The boards of the bunk were splintery, but he moved very little. If he remained quiet, the pimentade on his torn and aching buttocks burned only dully. If he moved, it seemed that extra droplets of the tortuous mixture seeped into new, raw crevices of flesh and set up additional fires.

His outraged pride flamed without letup. That he who was king, was emperor, should be so dishonored! That he, who in his native land opposed slavery, who counseled and stood ready to fight to prevent slavery, should be chattel in this great tribe of Louisianal! That his honorable plan to buy his freedom and that of his beloved, could so easily be brushed out of existence by the white master!

To continue as chattel was unthinkable. The moment he got out of this jail, the instant they put him back to cobbling, and he was not chained, he would run. When they put him to a wench tonight, he might be able to run.

He turned his head, laid his other cheek against the bunk, felt the pain flicker through his buttocks. Across from him sat an ebony-black, very strong buck of about thirty. His right ankle, like Royal's, was spanceled to an iron ring in the floor by a length of chain.

He had a big face with big features and he was

scowling. "I 'us wondahin', boy," he said. "Thought you might be unconscious, way you didn' move."

"I know what's going on," Royal said.

"I named Ebon, 'cause I so black," said the buck.

"I know," Royal replied. "I see you at a distance."

"I reckoned you'd know me," Ebon said with satisfaction, "me so big an' so black. We ain' nevah bin in the same buck-pen—you at the shoeshop daytimes, me in the fiel's—both of us put to wench'es evah night. I 'us the mastah's prize breedah till he got you. But he ain' goin' to let up usin' me—he tol' me so—so I ain' got no reason to dislike you. I git as many wench'es as you git, an' I don' like to bust 'em, so you welcome to the new ones. They moved 'em out so's they could put us in heah. Time you git them new ones broke in, they be able to give me some pleasuah."

"They some trouble, the virgins," Royal agreed.

"You should know," said Ebon. "Bustin' one of 'em got you in heah, didn' it?"

"I suppose it did," Royal agreed, after a moment.

It would be useless to tell a fellow slave what had really happened, and it might be fatal. For Royal, a slave, to accuse Slocum, a white man almost certainly would bring Royal death by execution.

"How come you teah that wench up?" Ebon asked.

"You ain' evah toah any of the othah wench'es up."

"No, I ain't," Royal said.

"You suah you done it?" the other slave pressed.

"You suah it wasn' somebody else."

"I'm the one whipped," Royal replied. "That tells enough, don't it?"

"It tell two ways," the buck pointed out. "It tell you done it, an' it tell that somebody else done it an' you got the whippin'."

"One way is bound to be wrong, ain't it?" countered Royal. "And if I don't say somebody else did it, and

I'm the one whipped and in jail, don't it look to you like I'm the one?"

"You scahiahed, boy?" asked Ebon.

"Scared of what?"

"Of joinin' up?"

"Joining up to what?"

"Ain' you heard, boy . . . why you think I'm heah? Why you think the mastah got me locked in jail, 'stead of out in the fiel' workin'?"

"I reckon you broke some rule," Royal said, feeling a quick regret he'd been so bound up in his own trouble that he'd had not thought for his fellow prisoner. Such was not a king's behavior.

"You won' tell what I say?"

"If you ask me not to."

"I axin'—don' tell nobody—no white, an' no wench. Wenches nevah kin leahn to hol' theah tongue. Sometimes I don' blame the mastah when he say he goin' to cut some wench's tongue out. One of these days he'll just do it, too."

"If you don't want to tell me," Royal said, "I don't mind. No sense telling me, then worrying if I'm going to tell somebody else."

"Worryin's paht of what I got to do," Ebon said. "Ebon in jail foah talkin' to othah slaves while we workin' in the fiel'. Mastah Lee don' 'low slaves to talk in the fiel's. So I got to stay in the jail a week. Without no wench. Because I talked in the fiel'."

"How about the stud-pen?" Royal asked. "Theah's talk in the pens at night."

"Not the kin' of talk I whispahed in the fiel'," Ebon confided. "They's a coupled spies in evah pen, goes straight to the mastah an' blabs, so my kin' of talk don' take place in the pens. It take place in the fiel's . . . private . . . 'tween me an one othah slave at a time. If the mastah know what I talk in the fiel's, he execute

me . . . or cut my tongue out an' sell me off to Alabama to wu'k in the cotton."

Ebon was right about that, Royal thought. Hunnicutt was a stern master. He wondered if all white men were like Hunnicutt.

"We goin' to have an uprisin'," Ebon whispered. "Right heah at Hunnicutt Hill. We goin' to git us some knives an' some guns, an' we goin' to kill evah white on the place an' bury 'em, an' then we goin' to jus' sort of melt away into the swamps. By the time anybody misses the mastah or his bride or Mistah Slocum or that white trash cousin of Mastah Lee's, we all be gone, we all be free. Evah slave at Hunnicutt Hill goin' to be free. Them that don' wan' to join us, we'll kill foah ouah own safety. What you think of ouah plan, boy?"

Royal's heart thudded. "That's insurrection!" he exclaimed, the enormity of it ringing in his ears. "One of the old slaves explained insurrection to me. You really think you can do it?"

"Why not, boy? They ain' but foah whites—two men an' two women. We kin kill 'em as easy as crushin' a bug undah ouah foot."

"But the slaves . . . suppose enough won't join you?"

"They join when we git the white folks kilt," Ebon said confidently. "An' aftah we kill them dawgs."

"Suppose they get scared?" Royal asked. "Suppose they take word to other white men?"

"We'll kill 'em fu'st," Ebon repeated. "Kill 'em an' go. Eithah way, we be long gone an' safe. You joinin' up, boy?"

"You seem to have lost youah fear that I'll tell," Royal observed.

"Boy," Ebon grinned, whispering, "it jus' come to mel you a'ready in a bunch of trouble . . . Mastah Lee a'ready powahful displeased with you! You go tellin' him 'bout any insurrection, the res' of us will claim that

you 'us the one gittin' up the insurrection, an' he'll execute you!"

"He might execute some of you, too," Royal said.

"But it ain' goin' to come to that, is it?" Ebon grinned. "You ain' goin' tell."

Inwardly Royal felt a trace of answering smile which never reached his lips. "No," he promised, "I won't tell."

"An' you join us? You he'p me lead?"

"I'll have to think about it," Royal said. "It ain't a thing to hurry into."

"We takin' ouah time," Ebon agreed. "We won' go 'foah wintah. We layin' ouah plans slow an' cahful . . . an' a whippin' such as you jus' got he'ps git us othahs to join. Think slow if you wan', boy, but think deep."

Silence fell upon the jail room, and Royal closed his eyes.

He had to find a way to get back to Africa, to his people, who needed him. He had to find a new way to get Princess free, also.

To take her and simply flee through the swamps would, on careful consideration, be suicidal. He might be able to do it alone, but no girl could run through sucking mud, fight through the tangle of growth, keep pace with him ahead of baying hounds, men on horses and their killer-guns. However he fled, he would not go without Princess for he dared not leave her behind and risk her being sold away and lost to him forever.

If Ebon's mad plan worked—and it might, it just might—Royal and Princess could reach Boston. There they could get their freedom and work for money to take them home to Africa.

Ebon was fairly intelligent. Whether he could get the slaves at Hunnicutt Hill firmly organized was another matter. And whether he could plan, direct, and carry through the actual attack on the white at the crucial moment was still another matter.

Royal wasn't sure, at this point, that he wanted to be part of an insurrection, let alone become its leader. His mind slipped back to the middle plateau in Africa and how it was there before he left . . .

Virgins he had brought to his palace aplenty, as his king-right, his king-duty. In his tribe, in the confederation of tribes as well, the highest-born virgins held it an honor to be deflowered by their emperor.

Afterward, found thus to be woman fit for a king, the deflowered virgin had her choice of the young men of her own tribe and even those of neighboring tribes. They all vied in offering presents to her father to win her. Once she drank the cup of yam wine with a suitor, she was his woman and from that moment she was true to her man and gave him strong sons, the first of which might or might not closely resemble the king. It was a saying in the confederation, that a man's first son might look like the king, but the next would look like his sire.

And when the king took unto himself a queen, he deflowered virgins no more, leaving that pleasant task to his eldest son, the prince. The king kept to his one queen and she bore him sons, and he was content, for he had affairs of state to attend.

As King Nimi, Royal had searched honestly through all the tribes for a queen, his heart was set ever on the green-eyed daughter of the white King Jan. Yet he searched and he considered, striving to be just to all the princesses in choosing his empress, to find the best one of all and not let his own wishes prevail completely.

As King Nimi and as Emperor Nimi, he listened with sadness to reports that the Angola were systematically raiding the outer reaches of the middle plateau, taking Mandinga captive, both men and women, and selling them to white traders on the coast. As emperor, he went forth with a selected band, four men from each

of the confederated tribes—fifty-three men counting himself—and traveled far from Mpanzu to palaver with the Angola and reach a sound agreement by which the Angola would cease dealing in Mandinga flesh.

In the midst of palaver, a company of Angola warriors five times the size of Nimi's party, had set upon them with knives and ropes and chains. Nimi had led the defense, but half his men were slain and the other half, he among them, overpowered and chained and marched to a slave factory on the coast.

It took four brawny warriors to force Nimi, who was chained in a coffle of nine other blacks, into the barracoon at the head of the river where the brig *Carita* lay at anchor. He stood in the center of the barracoon, the coffle around him and beyond two hundred other sweating, chained, black captives, all of them naked, and keenly examined the prison which held them.

It was a big pen built of sharp-pointed poles set close together, towering above the captives' heads. All the blacks were chained in coffles of ten. Two white guards with guns were stationed on each of the four sides of the barracoon. There was no way to escape, not even for an emperor.

The next day, Nimi and his coffle-mates were herded out onto a large plain in front of the barracoon. Here surgeons from the brig examined every part of every one of them. Four guards with guns stood near, one on each side of the coffle.

The surgeon who examined Nimi was very fat and sweating copiously. He was a white man with a red nose, and looked to be one who drank much of the white man's wine.

He felt Nimi's skull, examined his wool for parasites, prodded every tooth, probed into his ears and looked up his nostrils. He pulled Nimi's eyelids apart and stared into his eyes, felt his neck, his body, his arms and legs, even probed between his toes. He weighed

Nimi's genitals, stroked and squeezed his man-part and laughed when it sprang to great size.

While he was pushing his fat finger up Nimi's rectum, a white man who roared every time he spoke came over to them and in turn himself began to examine Nimi. Nimi didn't like white-man stink; when they sweated they smelled sharp and sour with none of the full, rich musk of the Mandinga. He had to hold himself firmly to keep from striking the surgeon and the roaring man, whose name he later learned was Captain Delft, to the ground.

"This one's sound," Captain Delft roared, slapping his palm hard against Nimi's shoulder. "Take him over and chain him to two poles of the barracoon."

An Angola came running with a red-hot iron, one of a number of irons heating in a fire over toward the water. He aimed it at Nimi's breast to burn him with the Dutch captain's mark.

"No ye don't!" roared Captain Delft. "Where I'm takin' this nigger, they don't want no brand on him! The others . . . but not this one! And not on the choicest wenches I'll pick!"

Nimi, of course, didn't understand what the captain said, but he understood that the roaring one was in charge and that for some reason he was not to be marked by the red-hot iron. He was then taken out of the coffle and chained securely to two of the sturdy, deep-sunk poles of the barracoon. It would be madness to wrench loose, even if he could, for now a white man, at the captain's order, came to stand only two steps away, and the white man had a gun. Presently another black was chained to the poles next to Nimi, and the red-hot iron was used on him. He yelled and hopped up and down, clutching his burned chest. Nimi was enraged at the unfeeling treatment, but felt pride that the screaming one was not Mandinga.

He noticed that some blacks were being rejected

by the surgeons. These he heard called Mackrons, and saw that they were above thirty-five years of age, or defective in teeth or lips or eyes, or grown gray, or they had a venereal disease or some other imperfection.

After the examinations and the brandings, Nimi and the others were returned to the barracoon where for a week they awaited shipment. And in that week, though he watched for the least opportunity, there was never a hope of escape. On the day they were loaded onto the ship, they were again ordered to strip naked before being put into canoes, men and women together. As they went aboard ship, each was given a piece of canvas to wrap around the waist.

Nimi took his gratefully, and then he was led below and chained, spoon fashion, between two fellow slaves. None of the blacks on the ship were Mandinga; he never saw one of his twenty-five Mandinga again.

And after the tortuous journey, he was sold to the master of Hunnicutt Hill.

And now he had to escape.

And it looked like Ebon's uprising was the only way.

CHAPTER II

THE weeks passed, slowly and uneventfully. Slocum wore a bandage around the wrist Princess had bitten. Royal overheard the overseer tell Hunnicutt one of the hounds had bitten him accidentally.

Royal constantly sought to talk again with Ebon, but the opportunity did not come. The only contact he had with the insurrectionist was a knowing look as Ebon passed the shoeshop on his way to the fields with the other field hands. But the look told him the insurrection was still planned, that a time would come when they could talk.

Each night Hunnicutt and Slocum put Royal to one of the seven new wenches, and each night the two white men remained in the stud-cabin. Twice and sometimes three times Royal covered the wench in question, then the master and the overseer took her away and locked him into the cabin alone.

Thus, though he covered Princess in her turn, he had no chance to talk to her, for the white men were always present.

For Royal the passing weeks were a period of marking time. He lived only for that day when he could take action. Once he managed to whisper to Princess as they lay on the mattress and the white men were speaking to each other, "There is a plan . . . be ready." So she was prepared. She knew something

would be done. She could have hope, without which one cannot survive.

Frances openly stared at Princess that afternoon when the wench was brought to her room. "Why, you're beautiful . . . truly beautiful!" she exclaimed. Then to the erect old white-haired butler: "Thank you, Bax. You may leave us alone now."

When he was gone, locking them in together, she put out her hand to Princess' red hair. "May I?" she asked, and when the girl half-smiled and nodded, Frances touched the hair. It was wiry and its curls seemed to spring out and wind themselves around her fingers.

"Princess?" Frances asked slowly and distinctly, for the girl was said to speak Mandinga only. "Is your name Princess?"

The girl smiled and nodded.

"And you were a princess in Africa?" Frances asked, foolishly, for of course the girl couldn't understand, not yet. She'd have to teach her English; Lee had warned her about that.

Again the girl nodded, her beautiful lips smiling, her head high and proud. "Mandinga princess," she said.

Frances caught her breath. If she didn't know differently, she'd think the girl understood English!

"You can't understand me yet, Princess," she said, "but I have something to say to you which I'll repeat after you learn my language. You are now a slave, a chattel, owned by my husband. He calls you a wench. I think of you as a girl, like myself. One day I'll see to it that you are freed. You are a princess, you are of royal blood, and you shall be free. And we will be friends."

"Friends?" repeated Princess, her voice soft and caressing. "I am happy to have a friend here, in this strange land."

"You know the language!" Frances gasped. "Where did you learn . . . why did you keep it secret?"

"My father taught me . . . he is a Dutchman and speaks many languages," said Princess. "I kept it secret because Royal said it would be better that way."

"What is your real name?" Frances asked.

"Jinga, Miss . . . what should I call you?"

"Why, 'Frances,' of course," replied Frances then, remembering, "No . . . that won't do! Oh, dear . . . call me Miss Frances, then! How silly . . . how childish to have to comply . . . to think that the first and only friend I've found in this cold-blooded place, in this heartless slave system, can't even call me by my name!"

"But I will be calling you by name, Miss Frances" smiled Princess. "I feel perhaps the same that you must call me Princess and not my true name."

They stared at each other in exasperation and warm understanding. And then, suddenly, they laughed together. And from that moment they were sound friends. And they intrigued together to lead the master and the house slaves to believe the wench was slowly learning to speak English.

Frances immediately became concerned about her new friend's clothes.

"That shift they've given you," she declared, "that osnaburg stuff, will never do! I've got my husband's consent to dress you as I see fit. Just so I don't spend too much money, he said. I think with your hair and your golden coloring, I'll put you in yellow and green and blue . . . one dress of each. Now, that's merely my thinking . . . tell me your preferences . . . tell me the color you'd like to wear."

"Miss Frances," the girl said happily, "I love yellow because it is from the sun in Africa, and I love every green in the jungle in Africa, and I love blue because it is the African sky. If I could choose from all colors I would choose the ones you named. Also, blue is the color of my father's eyes. His are the only blue eyes in all of Mandinga-Land."

"And yours the only green eyes," Frances teased.

"But yes!" Frances acknowledged, laughing. "Also I know these colors are good for me, as you said! And I wish to be beautiful for my man!"

"Royal?" Frances asked. "Is Royal your man?"

"I am his queen, his empress," the girl said simply. "You now hold my secrets in your hands, Miss Frances."

"Where they are safe," Frances told her soberly.

Then, because they were young, because they were friends, because secrets, even dangerous ones, were fun, they laughed together, their voices joining and rising.

They cut and sewed the dresses together, passing many pleasant hours, exchanging many feminine confidences. But never did Frances reveal how rudely her husband had deflowered her, and never did Princess confide that one day she and Royal planned escape.

Frances, however, suspected some plan and counseled against it. "Don't run into the swamp," she warned. "You'll be killed or captured. Wait. I'll get your freedom."

"I would not leave my man," Princess murmured, taking infinitesimal stitches in blue fabric.

"With my plan, you won't have to leave him," Frances said, but did not reveal what the plan was.

It was simple and possible and impossible. She would first get a supply of Lee's money; she had a legal right to a share of it, and she didn't need a great deal. Then she'd wait until he went up to New Orleans on some business or other, and she'd leave openly, go on the steamboat to New Orleans with Royal and Princess accompanying her as attendants. Before Lee returned to Hunnicutt Hill, she would be traveling by steamboat to Boston with her two slaves, and when she reached Boston she would see to it they were firmly free.

All she needed was the opportunity to get at Lee's money and his absence from Hunnicutt Hill even for a day.

Lee reminded Frances at supper that first night to dismiss Princess from her room early. He waited a proper time after his bride had gone upstairs, then went to her chamber to exercise his husbandly rights. To his surprise she was ready and waiting in a white night shift. Her robe was flung across a chair, which shocked him, for he'd never seen anything but complete modesty on her part.

Still, he'd never seen a woman as chastely lovely, with skin fair against the white garment, pale blond hair floating to her shoulders, eyes cool as blue ice. She looked like an angel, and she was his, exactly what he wanted.

Already she was tamed down some. Not enough, of course, for no woman with her spirit was going to be tamed in one session, but she was quieting down nicely. The thought of her cool, chaste body inflamed him and he flung off his robe, under which he was naked, and started for her.

She held him off, palms against his bare chest. "Lee," she said, "I'll submit, but—"

"They ain' no 'but' about it!" he flared. "You my wife an' I got my rights, an' the soonah you accep' that, the bettah."

"And the sooner you approach me like a gentleman," she retorted, her voice spirited, "the easier it will be for me to submit, and the more you can enjoy it."

He took a backward step, staring. "Don' evah say a thing like that ag'in!" he half-whispered. "No lady would think of usin' the wohd 'enjoy' at a time like this! You was a lady when I mahhied you—at least I thought you was a lady—an' I aim foah you to be a lady to the las' day of youah life! What I as youah husban', as a man, may see fit to do is my affaih, an' if I should derive any pleasuah whatsoever, it is not foah you to know or think about. A good, pure woman nevah has

such a thought sully up huh min'. You'll fin' that I'll treat you like a lady—this mornin' early was nothin' but an ordiniry, necessiry step ev'ry man has to take with his bride. Now. Lay down on the bed."

He watched her climb onto the big double bed, the very fabric of her snowy night-shift, the very knowledge of what it concealed, bringing him to full, pulsing desire. Only this morning she had told him that if he ever touched her again she would kill him, murder him with her own hands. And look at her now! The memory of this morning increased his desire and impatience, added to his anticipation.

She lay on her back, as a lady should, eyes closed, upflung hands clenched into small fists at each side of that drifting blond hair. He lifted the gown, folded it at the waist, revealing the blond drift of curls covering her mound, and she did not stir. He pushed her legs apart, and she did not resist.

He positioned himself, took aim and plunged. She winced, a shudder coursing her body. So she was still sore. Well, nothing like more of the same for that particular soreness. He began to pump, slamming his thighs against her; he felt her body go tight, felt her vagina tighten around his plunging organ as if trying to push it out, and pumped harder.

"Move!" he ordered, making her gasp at each thrust. "Move!"

She stirred, lifted her hips. He slammed them down. She lifted again and he slammed again and pumped in a frenzy, impaling all her cool chastity. He emptied his seed within her and withdrew.

Her fists were still clenched, her eyes still closed, and there were tears running down her cheeks. "That's bettah," he told her. "Now you tamin' down. An' since you tamin', you kin have the run of the place. I ain' a jailah. I'm youah husban', an' you are my wife.

You can't have no ridin' ho'se yet, undahstan', but you kin have the run of the house an' groun's. You kin enjoy youahse'f daytimes."

Then, leaving her to her tears and the privacy of her chamber, he went to his own bed and slept the sleep of the gentleman.

Frances, whose tears were from anger, shame, and self-disgust, forced herself to stop weeping. Again, as earlier, she bathed in the hand basin. It was hours before she could fall asleep, hours during which she wondered how long she could endure this game of pretense, knowing that somehow she would endure.

Every night Lee came to her. He seemed to try to treat her gently, but always he became brutal in love-making. Always he left her bruised and sore.

Because he expected it, she took over the reins of the plantation house. She wore the keys to supply closets and cabinets at her waist. She issued foods and linens as needed each morning. Through Bax, the gentle old butler, she directed the force of house slaves. Most importantly, she discussed with Ginger what foods the master liked on his table, made out varied menus for a week ahead, each day telling the cook what to prepare, since Ginger could not read.

One noon at table. Frances asked her husband why no neighbors had called, and whether he wished her to entertain.

"I let it be known," he replied, "that we havin' ouah honeymoon heah at Hunnicutt Hill, an' we'd appreciate ouah privacy. I don' want people in an' out as a rule anyhow, an' I nevah bin a man to attend big gatherin's. I keep busy with my plantation, an' when I want entertainment, I go up to New Orleans. An' now that I have a bride, I'm busy evah night. As you know, my deah."

"Then you don't extend that famous southern hospi-

tality!" she retorted with a flare of the spirit she was trying to keep under control.

"Not at the moment . . . as I jus' explained," he replied smoothly. "Latah, when I have a son, we'll commence to entahtain. We'll cultivate all the othah best fam'lies then . . . an' you must re'lize theah ain' a finah fam'ly f'um way back on the Delta than the Hunnicutts. You'll have comp'ny aplenty when the time comes. Naturally, my sons are to know all the best people, an' the best people are to know the new, up-comin' generation of Hunnicutts."

Frances remained silent, aware that he took her silence for consent, agreement. She had no desire to become acquainted with the Delta people, had asked him about neighbors only as a step in her plot to put his mind at rest, so that he would believe she was taming down and settling in and would consequently further relax his vigilance.

She was at this period watching her husband's comings and going closely. When she was alone in the house, the slaves busy in the kitchen, she searched Lee's bedroom and library to find out where he kept his spending gold. She found a wall safe behind a painting in his room, but could not open it. Nor could she find the combination to the safe.

She could, however, dig up a pot of gold if she knew where it was. And Lee had three pots of gold buried at Hunnicutt Hill. He had told her this in Boston when he was describing the secure and carefree life she would enjoy as mistress of his plantation. Now she searched his desk and looked in the few books on the shelves, for a possible map marking the location of the buried pots, but found nothing.

She hated plotting, hated the need to steal from her own husband. But she knew no other way, for he gave her no money and had no knowledge of the small hoard

she'd brought with her. There was no one at Hunnicutt Hill to help her, no one in Boston to come to her rescue. Her escape from the intolerable prison of her marriage, from the slave system which she could neither accept nor endure, was strictly up to her. She had to use the means at hand.

Princess seemed to sense what she was doing, though the girl had not seen her searching. She did, however, go along when Frances followed Lee—keeping a distance behind him, hidden by trees and growth—as he went about the plantation. She hoped she would learn in this manner where he had the gold buried.

"Miss Frances is looking for something," Princess said quietly one day as they sat sewing.

Frances considered. Should she confide completely in her friend? Was it safe for Princess to know what she had in mind? Rather, was it not actually dangerous to Princess herself to know the secret? If she should accidentally betray it, or even if Lee should get suspicious and decide to find out what if anything his bride was up to, and proceed to beat and torture the girl for information, Princess would then have to choose between betrayal and possible death.

So she merely smiled at the girl and continued making tiny stitches in her own sewing.

The thought that she might have to change her plan unexpectedly for some reason and run from Lee like a slave came to her and kept recurring. Thus secretly, while Princess was ironing in the kitchen, Frances one morning stole up the steep, enclosed stairway to the attic. She was in search of a temporary hiding place should she need one.

The stair gave directly onto the cavernous, slope-ceiling attic. Here it was dusty and breathlessly hot. Old bedsteads were stacked at one side, some tables at the other. There were trunks and lockers, crazed pictures and a dusty mirror laced with cobwebs.

At the far front was another door, standing ajar. She pushed it open, revealing a small room. There were two cornshuck mattresses on the floor, an old marble-topped washstand and pitcher and bowl, even a kitchen chair.

Her pulse quickened. Why, it looked like it had been used for a bedroom at one time! But then her excitement fell. It might serve as a hiding place for a few hours, but it would not be really safe. Lee would search the house for her, first thing. She must find another hiding place, away from the house. Still, she remained long enough to make the little room readily usable.

That afternoon, following the long siesta which was a ritual on the Delta, Frances moved restlessly about her chamber while Princess smoothed the bed and tidied here and there. She was trying to decide whether to take the girl into her confidence about what she now meant to do.

Suddenly she cast discretion to the winds. Princess was her friend; this secret they should share, for the slave girl had as much right to it as she had herself.

"Princess," she said, "we're going exploring."

They hurried down the stairway and past old Bax, who held the door as they went onto the front gallery. "Bax," Frances asked, "where is the master?"

"Mastah done got on his ho'se an' rid off," the butler replied. "He didn' say wheah to, Miss Frances."

"If he returns," Frances said, "please tell him I've gone for a walk, and that Princess is with me."

She went around the house, across the back garden and made for the lane that led away from the river. She had never followed Lee down this drive, though she'd seen him ride into its greenness and disappear for hours. She wondered if he had gone in this direction today, then dismissed it from her mind. Today she

was not spying on him, but looking for a safe hiding place for herself and Princess.

"It is beautiful here, Miss Frances," Princess said after they were out of sight of the house. "Each time the road curves, it is more beautiful."

"Yes," Frances agreed, "it is."

All was greenness as they walked steadily away from the river. They exclaimed over the ever-present verdancy of grass, tree, and bush edging the bayou banks. Among overhanging willow branches clung masses of plants, and in the bayou itself were thickly-matted water hyacinths, their bulbous, waxen leaves holding lavender flowers over the water.

"It's a little like the jungle," Princess said, her eyes misty. "Wild and beautiful . . . it's like being home for a moment."

"None of it's like Boston," Frances said. "It's beautiful, but . . . frightening."

She was thinking of fleeing through the watery growth, of hiding, trying to find food.

"You look pale, Miss Frances," said the slave girl. "Do you want to go back to the house . . . will you feel safer there?"

"I can't go back yet," Frances said, pressing on. "I want you to help me. Because it may be for you, too . . . you and Royal, if you need it."

"What will be for us, Miss Frances?"

"The hiding place we must find—so that when we do get away, when we escape—we'll have a place to hide if we need it, a place to rest until we can really get away. A place for emergency."

Princess stopped in the lane, and Frances stopped with her. Their eyes locked, and Princess knew the mistress' secret, and the mistress knew the slave girl's secret.

"I wanted to keep you from knowing," Frances said,

"for fear that the master . . . that you might be tortured to make you tell what you knew . . . and now I've told you. Princess, I want to escape, too!"

"And I wanted to keep you from knowing that Royal plans something, though I don't know what it is," Princess returned. "I will tell you now also that I have his son in my womb."

The girls gazed at each other. Slowly they smiled and turned deeper into the ever-deepening swamp and walked on. Soon they began to run, lightly and swiftly, for they could not stay away from the house too long.

Around a bend, Frances spied the ruins of a small house. She crossed the bayou on a split log thrown across it, avoiding the slippery patches of moss. Princess followed closely.

Nearing the ruins, they moved cautiously, on the watch for snakes, glancing about to make sure no human being was in the vicinity. The great swamp trees stood silent and heavy with green; frogs croaked, birds flapped their wings and flew, occasionally a bird cried harshly in the pressing damp heat.

Frances picked her way carefully through the rubble of the fallen house, past a fireplace and chimney still standing where once a kitchen had been, and on. She was peering beyond when Princess found the opening in the ground a step from the chimney.

"Miss Frances!" she whispered. "A cave . . . come . . . it goes deep and is well hidden!"

Frances returned and followed the other girl down a flight of slick, mossy steps. Four steps down, and then the rocky floor. It was gray-dark and very cool; there was a damp stone ceiling so low they could reach up and touch it. The rock walls were damp and cool and mossy. Along the far side gurgled a little stream.

"What is this cave for?" whispered Princess.

"To keep food fresh," Frances whispered. "When it

wasn't too full of water. Look . . . even in this light you can see how far up the water has come . . . and stood."

"It seems to be a good hiding place," Princess murmured.

"Except for the dogs," Frances told her.

"The dogs?"

Quickly Frances explained how dogs were used for tracking runaway slaves. "If this cave has another opening," she said, "and we can walk in that stream and follow it out into the swamp, then this can possibly be used as a hiding place. Because, if you walk in water, you leave no spoor and the dogs can't trail you."

"But we walked on the earth," Princess said. "We walked down the steps; we were not in water."

"We're not hiding now," Frances laughed. "And the first time it rains, our spoor will be washed away. And it rains a great deal in Louisianal"

"And if the mastah has forgotten this cave is here," said Princess breathlessly, "then it could be used!"

"For a short time," Frances agreed, "but a short time only!"

She slipped off her sandals, gathered her skirts up in one hand and stepped into the water of the stream. It was icy. She groped along the wall, feeling her way with her feet and her free hand touching the moss and dampness of the rock alongside. Small splashing sounds told her that Princess was doing the same.

The stream led through gray dark into utter blackness. The ceiling lowered until Frances had to walk in a half-crouch, guiding herself now with one hand on the slimy wall, sliding her feet cautiously along the bed of the stream.

Ahead came a lightening of the blackness; she moved a trifle faster. The lightness grew, became dusky greenness, and at last she was standing in the tumbling cold

water before an opening screened by a tangle of bushes through which leapt the stream.

She pushed past the bushes into a heavily timbered area through which the stream came winding and hurtling, growing narrow and fast as it neared the cave. Princess caught up with her.

"It must go underground to get out the other side of the cave," the slave girl said. "We can use it, Miss Frances . . . oh, we can!"

Frances nodded, stepped out of the water, dried her feet as best she could on the grass and put on her sandals. Princess did the same and they continued to follow the stream to see from whence it rose and how its source was located in relation to the plantation house.

"Because we'd go to the head of the stream and follow it into the cave to hide our spoor," she explained, and Princess excitedly agreed.

"But they're bound to know about it," the slave girl said suddenly, her voice tense. "A cave like that . . . with a stream running through it."

"It's a risk we have to run," Frances said. "That they won't think about it right away."

"Miss Frances," whispered the slave girl suddenly, "there is a house . . . yonder! And there's the master, getting off his horse!"

Quickly they darted behind trees. Cautiously Frances peered around her tree and located a sprawling, unpainted cottage.

Thus she saw the tawny girl run from the house and fling herself into Lee Hunnicutt's arms, saw her bridegroom seize the girl by her flying hair, twist her face up to him and kiss her long and roughly.

She watched until they went into the house together, Lee's arm around the girl. Then she motioned to Princess, and they started back toward the plantation house.

She knew who the girl was—Lee's cousin, the one

he called white trash. Once he had told Frances he had such a cousin living on the fringe of Hunnicutt Hill.

But he hadn't told her that his white trash cousin was also his lover.

"This afternoon is secret," Frances said softly to the slave girl. "All of it."

"Yes," agreed Princess. "We hold each other's secrets, Miss Frances. We are friends."

That night, after she had strengthened her endurance and submitted to Lee, knowing that he was fresh from the arms of his cousin, and after she had at last fallen asleep, Frances dreamed. She dreamed of how she hated her bridegroom, of how repulsive and sickening it was to have him enter her body and tear it and beat it sore. She dreamed of the big slave Royal, dreamed that she was running away from Hunnicutt Hill and that he was helping her . . . helping her away . . . to Africa and kindness and safety and to be his empress and bask in the gentleness and strength which lay in his soul.

And she realized, even in the dream, that she had not yet met this great king-emperor-slave, that she had never spoken with him. And she dreamed that she must know him, that she must be cleansed of Lee's seed by the slave's seed, and that only so could she be healed.

By him and him alone.

CHAPTER 12

UNEXPECTEDLY, one night after covering one of the harem wenches, Royal was taken to the stud-pen to which he had originally been assigned and locked in with the others. There were a couple of candle stubs still guttering on a shelf, giving an uncertain, wavering light. When they burned down, the twenty bucks who occupied the pen had no other recourse than to stretch out on their wooden shelves and sleep.

When Slocum and the trustees had gone, a few of the bucks greeted Royal in a friendly manner. "Glad to see you ag'in," said a slave named Bill. Others mumbled greeting, but stiffly, and Royal knew this was caused by the fact that he was not only first-choice for covering any wench on the plantation, but also because he had his own special harem.

He lay down on his shelf, arms crossed under his head, and stared up at the dark ceiling, barely able to make it out in the flickering light. If the master made a practice of locking him into the stud-pen each night after he covered a wench, he'd have a chance to know these slaves, and they to know him. And, although it was unsafe to talk insurrection in the pens, he could size up the individuals as to their reliability.

He didn't often get to have discussions with the older, wiser slaves these days. Since he now worked daily with skinny, yellow-skinned old Silas on shoes and sandals and harness, he had little opportunity for talk.

Silas was talkative when it dealt with his craft, and kept an unending flow of words going about the quality of various leathers, about how to turn a sole and stitch on an upper, about how an adept shoe-making slave could be hired out in New Orleans, but nothing else. His interest began in his shoeshop and ended outside its door. If he thought at all when he lay on his shelf in the stud-pen, it was about leather.

Even now the old fellow lay on the shelf next to Royal's, undoubtedly with his eyes shut and visions of tomorrow's bridle for the master's stallion, Fury, filling his mind. He'd be picturing just how each tiny, perfect hole would be pierced in the new leather, how he would cut and stitch the various straps together.

Royal wondered where the old slave would stand on insurrection day, and thought he would never revolt, that he would be one of those slain and buried. He felt sad over this and determined that he would try to prepare the old fellow without letting him know what was afoot, try in this way to save his life when the actual hour came.

"Will, king-buck," drawled a heavy voice from directly across the pen. "Ain' you speakin' to us common niggahs . . . is we too fur 'neath you to waste youah breath on?"

Royal placed the speaker instantly, though he could not see him in the dim light. It was Guy, the mammoth, unbelievably black buck the master worked in the fields, trained vigorously at times, and matched against an occasional fighting buck in New Orleans. Guy, almost as big as Royal himself, had not yet been beaten, and twice he had killed the other fighter. Thus all the slaves at Hunnicutt Hill stood in awe and fear of him.

"I'll speak to anyone wants to speak to me," Royal replied.

"Well, I wan' to speak to yo', dat fo' suah," drawled

Guy. "It 'bout time somebody let yo' know how us-all feels 'bout you—playin' roun' with Silas, puttin' pieces of leathah togethah all day, an' pestahin' wenches all night."

"What I got to say about it?" asked Royal. "I do what the mastah orders."

"An' he ohdahs yo' to do 'zactly what yo' likes to do, don' he?" gibed Guy. "Then yo' cahhies yo' haid high, an' comes in heah an' don' speak to us! Well, we don' like dat kin' of treatmint. We good as yo' is . . . some of us is bettah . . . me, fo' instance. I notice the mastah ain' trainin' yo' to be no fightah."

Royal felt the wool on the back of his neck stir. This big brute was spoiling for trouble, was trying to pick a fight.

"No," he agreed, "the mastah ain't training me to be a fightah."

The last thing Royal wanted was to get himself into any more trouble. His whole object was to avoid the master's further displeasure and to learn all he could about the insurrection.

"Yo' scaihed?" challenged Guy. "Yo' 'feered to fight me?" He chuckled, an evil, deep-bellied sound that was more of a growl than anything else.

"I ain't afraid," Royal replied. "I don't want to fight."

"Why don' yo' wan' to fight, king-boy?"

"My reason is my affair," Royal told him grimly.

Despite himself, his body was tense. His muscles begged to go after the heckling, bullying Guy. His fists opened and closed despite his logic. He'll make me fight, he thought, neck-wool erect. And for no more reason than to see me punished afterward because I'm being used for stud more than he is.

"Yo' suah yo' reason ain' dat ha-rem yo' got, king-boy?" drawled Guy. "Yo' suah yo' ain' scahiahed I'll git hol' of yo' peckah an' twis' it off in a fight, an' you won' have nothin' lef' to push into dem pussies?"

"Now, Guy!" put in a voice Royal didn't recognize. "You go wu'kin up a fight in heah, an' we all git whipped—you know dat!"

"You' lil' weasell!" snarled Guy. "Yo' peckahless lil' gawdamn' titty-boy! Yo' nevah was a buck, an' yo' won' nevah be a buck . . . yo' ain' got a gut in yo' whole cahcass! De mastah know what a weasel yo' is, he sell you nex' coffle comes 'long! De mastah values a buck like me . . . one that kin wu'k an' pestah a wench an' win him money fightin'! Who yo' to put-in when I talkin' to dis king-boy think he so 'pohtant?"

"He right, Guy," spoke up another voice. "You pick a fight heah in de buck-pen an' we all git whupped!"

"Sho', Guy," said still another voice, "don' git us whupped! Leave the buck alone . . . he don' wan' no trouble . . . we don' wan' no trouble . . . you's the one wantin' trouble!"

"Mebbe yo' wan' to fight me, all of yo' wan' me to quit discussin' with king-boy heah?" Guy challenged loudly. He came off his bunk with a thud that made the sturdy floor give. "I ready . . . come on, yo' bucks!" he dared. "Well," he demanded after a dead silence, "yo' goin' fight or not?"

"If you fight you have to fight you'se'f," said a new voice. "Or you got to jus' grab one of us an' staht poundin'. We don' wan' no whuppin'. 'Sides, we got nothin' to fight 'bout."

Again Guy gave his evil chuckle. He made no move to attack any of the bucks, but neither did he again lie down on his shelf.

"Yo' king-boy," he persisted, "yo' re'lly got king-blood?"

Breathing slowly to subdue his building anger, Royal made no answer.

"Dat white girl you pestahin' . . . dat one dat's so neah white she got red haiah an' green eyes . . . has she got red haih on huh pussy too, king-boy?"

Royal came to his feet, fists ready. Hands caught his arms, dragged back. With effort he remained standing, letting the hands detain him. There was red in his brain, red raying out of the pale candlelight; there was red in every breath he sucked in.

"An' how is dat red-pussy to yo' black peckah, king-boy?" goaded the evil buck. "Dat red pussy good to yo' peckah . . . it any good . . . how she fuck, king-boy?"

With one lunge, Royal tore out of the hands holding him. One leap and he was across the pen, his right fist slashing hard, slamming Guy on the ear.

The mammoth fighter hammered both fists down like sledges, one chopping Royal's neck, the other smashing him full in the nose, sending him staggering back into a solid, breathing wall of watching slaves. Royal caught his balance and hurtled into the fighter, head down, slamming one fist over the heart, the other into the ribs. Guy grunted deeply, and gave way. Royal dogged him, fists going, slugging him in the face, the heart, the belly.

Guy stopped, stood as solid as rock, absorbing Royal's furious, shaking blows. Suddenly he side-stepped, and as Royal weeled to come at him, crashed one great fist into Royal's belly, the other into his groin. The blow in the groin slammed Royal to the floor, doubled with pain. He scrambled to his feet, but Guy came at him again, a battering ram of black power, and bore him back to the floor.

They rolled, trying to get at each other. Now Royal felt himself revert to the jungle, and gloried in it. Like the great jungle cats, he drew back his lips in a snarl, teeth parted, and like those killer cats, both the spotted and the striped, he went for his enemy's throat with his teeth.

Guy's fingers rammed into his eyes and stayed, gouging. The pain in his groin rayed through his body,

that in his eyes through his head. His own great hands circled that neck. Then, as they rolled, his jaws parted and his teeth got purchase on the windpipe and came together, and that way he held on, teeth biting out his enemy's life, thumbs crushing the neck above the collar-bone, groin and eyes spraying agony through all of him from his enemy. Locked thus in mortal battle, they struggled, bumping into the ankles of the circled, watching, unbreathing, frightened slaves.

Blood was thundering in Royal's ears: the salt of Guy's evil blood was upon his tongue and through his mouth. His eyes were pushing and burning toward the back of his skull. There was only death in the pen—death for him or for the other.

New hands came onto him, many and rude and strong hands, pulling him up, prying his mouth off that evil throat, lifting him. Guy's thumbs were gone from his eyes, which surged and leapt with pain now that they were without that terrible gouging pressure which had, somehow, helped him to bear the pain.

The hands hauled him to his shelf, forced him onto it. Dazed with pain, he let them do what they would. Across the pen, others were forcing Guy, who was coughing, onto his shelf. The candles, almost ready to gutter out, flared up, showed the frightened, listening bucks scurrying each for his own shelf as the pen door banged open and Slocum stalked in. He was followed by Happ and Bone, one of whom carried a lantern.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" demanded Slocum. "Can't a man make his final rounds and git hisself a night's rest without hearin' a disturbance? Speak up—there was fightin' goin' on in here! Who was fightin'?"

The candles guttered and went out. Hot wax smell rose in the pen. The lantern shone on the concerted rolling whites of eyes, on the motionless twenty bucks on the shelves.

"Talk!" Slocum ordered viciously. "Somebody was fightin'!"

"What is it, Mistah Slocum?" asked Hunnicutt from the doorway. "Trouble?"

"Trouble enough, Mister Hunnicutt," replied the overseer furiously. "These damned niggers bin fightin' . . . some of them has . . . but they've shut their no-good mouths like niggers always do, and I ain't got a word out of them! Likely with yer permission, sir, I getter take the whip to them."

Hunnicutt stepped to the center of the pen. "Happ," he ordered, "shine that lantern into' ev'ry buck's face, one aftah the othah, an' let me see foah myse'f who's bin fightin'. You all know," he continued, "that you ain' allowed to fight amongst youahse'fs no more than I'd let my bloodhoun's fight amongst theahse'fs an' teah each othah up!"

Royal could see nothing yet with his gouged eyes. All was darkness with a blur of light in it, which would be the lantern. He knew the master was looking at each slave, searching for broken skin or bruises, and wondered how the master would be able to detect anything on black skin in such poor light.

Presently he felt the warmth of the light on his own face, felt the master's fingers prodding and poking. He heard the deep, breathless silence of the others as the master actually examined one of the culprits.

"You all right, Royal?" the master asked. "You hurt anywheah?"

"No, Mastah," Royal lied. He couldn't risk being whipped and locked into the jail again. Anything but that.

The master and the lantern moved on. Royal knew when he reached Guy, knew by the breath-holding silence. His mind called desperately to his fellow-slaves, Make some sound . . . don't you realize that when you go still . . . the master could tell from that . . .

that Guy is the one . . . ? Not that he wanted Guy to escape. But if Guy was singled out, he might tell whom he'd fought with—would tell. And that might cause the master to sell them both off and Royal would never be able to get back to Princess again.

But the master had not discovered the toothmarks on Guy's very black skin, and now he went on to the next buck, and the next. After he had looked over every one of the twenty, he stood in the middle of the pen and said what he had to say.

"Since none of you'll talk," he decreed, "you all got to be punished."

"Oh, mastah!" wailed a voice. "Please don' whup Tom! Tom nevah be whupped afoah!"

"If you don' want punishment," Hunnicutt said, "tell me which bucks were fightin'."

"Tom don' know nothin', mastah!" wailed the voice.

"Any of you know somethin', tell me befoah it too late," said the master.

His answer was silence.

"All right," he went on. "You all should be whipped foah such goin's on, but I don' wan' *twenty* bucks soah an' unable to wu'k. Still, you all got to be punished, an' severely. F'ust, you got no grub tomorrow 'til sup-pah time. You got to wu'k hahd all day an' two houahs longah than usual . . . without a bite of grub. When you locked up in the pen foah the night, you git grits an' fatback an' greens . . . jus' one modest po'tion each. Second, you git no wenches foah two weeks, an' durin' the two weeks, you each be spanceled to youah shelves so's you can't touch youah peckah or any othah buck's peckah. An' if you caught tryin' to jerk them peckahs durin' the day at wu'hk, you git whipped an' youah time without a wench'll be doubled."

Where before there had been utter silence in the pen, there was now a soft, rippling moan. Royal could now

see well enough to glimpse Hunnicutt's wicked smile at this moan.

"Mistah Slocum," the master ordered, "leave the trustees heah, an' you go to the house an' git two pistols. Git Missus Hunnicutt's maid . . . git that Princess-wench an' bring huh heah. On the way back, unlock the south wench pen an' bring that Pansy-wench, the one all the bucks wanted to pestah befoah we got the harem."

Royal sat on his shelf, groin aching deeply, eyes throbbing, that blood-beat low and hard in his ears. Why would the master have Princess brought here, to the stud-pen. What humiliation did he have in mind for her?

Anger surged along his blood. There was no decent reason for the master to bring Princess . . . or Pansy, for that matter . . . into the stud-pen.

Eons later, the next heartbeat later, Slocum was entering the pen, driving Princess and Pansy before him as if they were two young heifers. Royal's surging blood leapt, quieted only by the exertion of his will. But his body was tense, and he was sitting on the very edge of his shelf. He saw Princess locate him, even in the dark light, and look quickly away.

"I am not so cruel as to deprive you of all pleasuah," the master said, as the wenches, Princess in a new dress and Pansy in a thin osnaburg shift, stood with the lantern light shining on them. "I re'lize how hahd it is foah you to know you won' git to covah a wench foah two whole weeks. So I aim to give you pleasuah now . . . that is, if you kin git pleasuah watchin' what youah goin' to see. Puhsonally, I figuah you'll fin' it right severe punishment—bad as a whippin'—'cause you goin' to see it not on'y tonight, but evah night."

Princess was standing with her eyes downcast. Pansy

was glancing brightly about the pen, eyes dancing at her favorites, coming to Royal and clinging. She was about the only wench on the plantation he'd never covered.

"Hang the lantern on that hook," the master ordered Happ. "Mistah Slocum, give Happ one pistol an' Bone the othah. An' you two use them pistols on any slave makes a move," he ordered. "Now, you wenches shuck down . . . fast!"

Royal's muscles tensed. Hands came onto him from each side, and he settled back. It was little Silas on one side and the slave Tom on the other. He remained still because he had to; if he were to strike Hunnicutt out of his path, grab Princess and run for the door, the trustees would shoot them both.

Breathing hard, he watched Princess remove her garments, opening her lovely body to the vile, lascivious gaze of the other twenty-four males.

"You Happ an' Bone," the master said, opening his trousers, "shoot any buck touches his peckah. Git youahsef ready to pestah that Pansy-wench, Mistah Slocum." He turned to Princess with a rude gesture. "Lay down on the floah."

Slowly she obeyed, never glancing toward Royal.

He gripped the edge of his shelf so hard his hands ached, and he continued gripping, harder by the second. It was do that or use those hands to strangle the master, to protect his love and, at the same time, sign her fate forever.

Eyes staring so hard that now they hurt in reverse to the gouging, he watched the master free his male-part and ram into Princess. She cried out softly, and Hunnicutt began to pump, gripping her naked hips, pulling her up off the puncheon floor on each upsurge, slamming her down hard with his stabbing organ.

Slocum was pumping just as hard on Pansy, but Royal gave them not so much as a glance. He couldn't

see Princess, for she was hidden by Hunnicutt's brutal body; he could see only her outflung fist, clenched as tightly as his own were clenched on the edge of the shelf.

He felt many hands on his arms, dragging him back ever back and knew, dimly, that he must have tried to get off the shelf to choke the master and kill him. Now some voice of sanity seeped through his rage, reminding him that would only make matters worse. He had to bear this outrage; Princess had to bear it.

Their time would come. He would make it come. He would see Ebon tomorrow, speak of the insurrection, try to hasten it.

The watching bucks were squirming and moaning. Even the ones holding Royal were moaning; he could hear the sounds and feel their hot breaths hitting the back of his neck, the sides of his face.

Hunnicutt rose from Princess and Slocum from Pansy.

"How you feel, Mistah Slocum?" the master asked, evil dripping from his tone. "You up to takin' on this wench while I take on youahs? You man enough to take two at a time?"

"Hell yes, Mister Hunnicutt," declared Slocum.

The two buried their parts in the traded wenches. This time Royal could see the top of Princess' head, see her eyes when the overseer lifted his body for each downstroke. Her eyes were closed, and tears were running down her cheeks.

Half-crazy, Royal squeezed the edge of the shelf, lunging his body forward against the hands holding him. There were more hands now, stronger, and a louder moaning immediately in his ears. He was aware that at least six of his fellow-blacks were keeping him from killing the master.

At last the white men rose, sated. Hunnicutt took one pistol himself and gave the other to the overseer. "Now Happ," he said, "you take the princess. Bone, you take

Pansy. We don' wan' to stint on the entahtainment we give these bucks. They re'lly enjoyin' it . . . you kin heah them enjoy it in theah moanin' an' groanin'. Three go-roun's they goin' to see each and ev'rynight."

Royal lunged, but didn't get off the shelf, didn't really move. His black fellows had their arms wrapped strongly around him, holding him from the side and from behind.

When it was over, the master ordered the wenches to put on their clothes again.

Princess moved as if she were in pain. The lantern light glinted on drops of blood where she had been. The other wench was bright-eyed and angry, but she put on her garment obediently enough.

"You trustees, you bin re-wahded," Hunnicutt said. "Spancel all these niggahs so's they can' git at they peckahs, an' so they can' git at each othah's peckahs. Then lock the doah an' Mistah Slocum will lock you in youah pen."

After the men and trusties and wenches were gone, Royal lay shaking with rage. His hands were spanceled to the uprights at the head of his shelf; his ankles were spanceled to the foot. He could not so much as sit up. He lay listening to his fellows groan and curse, listened to the fires of their burnings lick through their groans.

Through his own man-part was distended, he had no true desire. He had only the desire to kill, to seize his beautiful, ravaged and bleeding Princess and flee . . . into the swamp . . . anywhere.

A small rattling sounded at the door. It swung inward, and a figure in white entered, stood in the darkness, faintly outlined by the starlight outside.

"Royal," came a whisper. "Royal . . . which one are you?"

Suddenly he knew who it was. It was the mistress. It was Lee Hunnicutt's bride.

CHAPTER 13

"OVAH here . . . in the middle, to your right, Royal whispered back.

The stud-pen had gone utterly silent at the sound of her voice. The silence pulsed as the roused, tortured bucks lusted for woman, any woman. Royal knew they were ready to grab the mistress, rape and ravish her with never a thought for who she was.

Perhaps it was in his power thus to get revenge on Hunnicutt—to see the master's bride used as his beloved had been used. But even as he had the thought, he knew he would not permit such a thing, that he would fight to prevent it.

She was at his shelf now, and she had keys. He heard their small jingle as she stopped beside him. "Royal?" she whispered.

"Yes, Mistress," he murmured.

She fumbled at the lock which held his wrist manacles to the upright, tried a key, another. This one turned in the small lock and his wrists were free. Already she was at his ankles.

"Hurry!" she urged, and made for the door.

She was running, but he was at her heels in a stride. Outside, he waited while she locked the stud-pen, walked swiftly beside her as she ran for the house.

She fell to a fast walk through the back garden, which was heavy with the scent of roses, and Royal slowed his pace, moving noiselessly just behind her. At the

foot of the outside stairway, she held her finger to her lips, then ascended tiptoe. Royal's great feet made not even a brushing sound as he followed.

Around the upstairs gallery they crept, to the front of the house, where the mistress went through one of the floorlength windows. Royal stepped in after her, into a chamber which was deep, glowing red and dazzling white in the light from many lamps. The carpet was soft under his feet, and as the mistress pulled the hangings across the window through which they had entered, a possible reason for her bringing him here stabbed through him and he recoiled from it. He could not risk his future and that of Princess and of his empire by covering a white woman, not even if she demanded it.

"Mistress," he asked fearfully, stepping out of his place as slave, but having to know, "why did you bring me here?"

"It's Princess," she whispered. "She's very ill . . . she's been calling for you. Be very quiet . . . no one knows she's ill."

Tiptoe, she led around an ornately carved wooden screen which hid the bed from the window through which they had entered. Princess lay there as if dead, the sheet pulled to her chin.

Royal reached her in a stride. Only the mistress' palms against his chest kept him from sweeping his ravaged love into his arms.

"She's unconscious . . . or sleeping," whispered the mistress. "Wait. Whatever you do, don't try to lift her. She might . . . well, she isn't strong enough, Royal."

An inward terror took him, an inward trembling. "Do you know what happened to her—in the pen?" he asked.

She nodded, and even in his apprehension for Princess, he noted how pale the mistress was. "She told

me . . . all of it. How the overseer, and one of the trustees . . . even my husband . . .”

“And you tended her where she was hurt, Mistress?”

“Of course. She . . . hemorrhaged. I ran a risk . . . I didn’t call in any of the slave women, but worked with her myself.”

“‘Hemorrhaged?’” Royal repeated, puzzled.

“That means she lost a great deal of blood,” the mistress explained. “But I think she’ll be all right now . . . if she lies quietly in bed for a few days.”

“They . . . in the pen . . . tore her that much?”

“Not exactly,” the mistress said, staring at Royal’s face, which he could feel twist with rage, “but what they did must have caused . . . what happened.”

“What happened?” demanded Royal, all king now, slaveship forgotten. “What happened to my queen?”

“I miscarried, Royal,” Princess said weakly from the bed. “I lost our son.”

CHAPTER 14

FRANCES saw his magnificent, silent grief come upon him. She saw cold, hard murder come into his eyes and knew it was for her husband, for Slocum, for the trustee, all of whom had ravaged Princess, all of whom had slain his son in the womb.

And she knew, with sudden, devastating truth, that she would give her soul to inspire such love in a man like Royal, to merit such sure, merciless retribution for harm done to her. Her heart seemed to rise into her throat and flutter and beat, crying for such love.

"I will take you from this place tonight . . . now," Royal told his love. "But first I will seek out the mastah and kill him with my hands."

"Royal," Princess cried weakly, "Royal . . . you must wait!"

"Princess can't go anywhere now," Frances told him. "It would start the bleeding again, and if that happens . . ."

"I'll go if he wants it, Miss Frances," Princess said. "He is my man. But if you kill the mastah," she told Royal, "then I will not go."

"He killed my son. He almost killed you."

"Our son is gone and can never be," Princess said weakly, "nor such a one as he. But one day we will have a son. This is a thing you know as well as I."

"If the bleeding did start again," Royal asked Frances, "what would happen? Would she die?"

"She could die. Running through the swamps . . ."

"I'll carry her."

"Even so. She is too weak. It is too dangerous."

"Tomorrow night they'll be at her again. Three of them. The mastah said so. That too would kill her."

"Yes," Frances admitted. "But I'll not let my husband take her out of this room tomorrow night. Or any night. I'll keep her with me . . . she is my maid, and I have that right."

"What powah have you ovah your husband?" demanded Royal.

"None," she admitted thoughtfully, "none at all. Take her, then. But wait until everybody is asleep, until I get food from the kitchen for you to take. Let her rest a bit longer."

"Miss Frances," gasped Princess, "it's . . . starting again!"

Frances whipped back the sheet and bent over the girl. She was indeed hemorrhaging, much worse than before. She staunched the blood with the sheet, whispering orders.

"Open the drawer at the bottom of my armoire . . . that tall piece yonder," she directed. "Be very quiet . . . bring pillow cases . . . towels . . . anything!"

He brought them to her, and she seized one after another, sopping up blood, her breath a hurting needle through her body. Under the golden tones of her skin, Princess was more deathly pale than ever; her lips were drained of color. Though she was moaning faintly, she seemed to be unconscious. Swiftly Frances worked over her, and without ceasing.

As the mistress dropped each bloody cloth, Royal had another clean one ready for her hand. His breath was sucking in and out, hitting the mistress' cheek, bouncing back to gently strike his face.

"Bring water in the basin!" the mistress told him.

He brought the cool water that the white woman used to bathe his beloved. He crouched, useless, beside the bed and watched the slim white hands work over the unconscious, bleeding girl.

Princess had carried within her body his seed, and he had known nothing of it until his son had issued forth on her blood and been lost. Or—the horrible possibility hit him—had it been Slocum's vile seed of which she had been rid? Had she been cleansed of the overseer's filth, or had she lost the royal seed? Should he grieve . . . or should he rejoice?

He groaned, and the mistress said in a trembling voice, "I believe it's stopping! I believe the danger is past."

He watched the mistress pack the torn and tortured part which might yet be the death of Princess. When it was finished, she spread a clean sheet over the girl, who had now fallen into what might or might not be natural sleep.

The mistress bundled the soiled linens and put them into a jar at the corner of the room. Royal carried the basin for her and emptied the water into another jar, for slops. He set the basin on the washstand, padded noiselessly back to the bed.

The mistress followed, laid her hand on Princess' forehead. "She's running a temperature!" she whispered. "I'm frightened . . . I don't know what more to do!"

He laid his ear to Princess' heart, felt her brow. "She is sleeping," he said. "She is not too warm. She is better."

The mistress gazed up at him, her eyes clinging to his. He saw that she was trembling so she could scarcely stand. "You love her, don't you?" she whispered.

"She is my queen," he said, nodding.

"Even after all the others, here on the plantation—and back in Africa, too?"

"Yes," he said.

"After all those . . . Princess is the one you love?"

"She is the one."

"And those others—they loved you?"

"Not on the plantation. Pestering is a business here. In Africa . . . maybe they loved me a little. They needed me. Before they got their own men."

Now he wished that he had not said it, for he saw the mistress' need. It was quivering within the trembling of her body, flickering in her eyes, shaking her lips, pulsing at the base of her delicate throat.

She laid her small white hands on his naked chest, lifted her pleading eyes. "Heal me, Royall" she whispered. "Heal me!"

Knowing that it would cost his life if he were caught, Royal obliged her as he would oblige a tribal girl. He owed it to her, both because of her need and because she had saved Princess' life tonight.

He lifted her in his arms, strode to the other side of the carved screen, stood her down. Since she seemed unable to move, he clumsily stripped off her fragile garments. For an instant he marveled at the pure white and blond beauty thus revealed.

Then he stepped out of his breeches, bore her to the carpet and gently pressed his swelling organ deep into her throbbing need. And the comfort he found therein, the ease and satisfaction with which he poured his trouble into her, comforted him.

She lay quiet at last, hands on his arms, stroking and stroking. "Royal," she whispered, "oh, Royal . . . I am healed . . . I am!"

Suddenly the knob of the chamber door rattled violently. "Frances!" yelled Hunnicutt. "What the hell you got me locked out foah? Unlock this doah an' let youah husban' in!"

CHAPTER 15

"THE window!" Frances breathed. She seized her clothing, raced to the armoire and thrust it inside. She snatched out a peignoir and struggled into it.

Lee hammered on the door. "Frances!" he yelled. "you deliberately cohtin' bein' locked in ag'in?"

"Coming!" she called, motioning desperately at Royal to go. He began moving toward the bed, breeches in hand. She shoved him toward the window. "Wait 'til he's gone," she whispered, "you can't take her now!"

Reluctantly he turned, reached the window in two strides. As the hangings fell into place behind him, she unlocked the door.

Lee burst in. "What the hell you doin' locked in heah?" he raged. He strode toward the bed, stopped short when he saw Princess. "What the hell's the wench doin' in youah bed?" he demanded. Suddenly he stiffened and turned his head this way and that, sniffing. "I smell musk," he declared. "What niggah's bin locked into this chambah with you an' the wench, Frances?"

"I should think you would smell something," Frances retorted, keeping her tone spirited though her heart was constricted with fear. "Princess has been hemorrhaging . . . she's had a miscarriage. You've lost your first valuable sucker out of your prize wench by your prize stud!"

His face blanched. He rushed over to the bed.

"Wheah's Gingah?" he demanded. "Why didn' she stop such foolishness?"

"Ginger," Frances cried, her spirit genuine now, her anger real, "was asleep in her cabin at the very moment you and that overseer and that trustee were misusing this girl! What are you, Lee—a monster or a crazy man? If you have no gentleness in you, no consideration, don't you at least have some regard for your investments?"

Lee began to curse, berating the now rousing Princess for losing his valuable property. "An' futhahmoah," he stormed, "git out of youah mistress' bed!"

"No, Lee," Frances put in crisply. "If she moves . . . if she begins to hemorrhage again . . . this time you'll lose a wench, not just a two hundred dollar sucker!"

He looked at Frances sharply, but said no more to Princess. Again he was sniffing the air. "That ain' blood alone," he said viciously. "I know musk when I smell it! That stud sneaked in heah, didn't he?" He seized Frances's shoulders and shook her. "He sneaked in heah an' covahed this wench! Fu'st he mahked huh up when he covahed huh, an' now he toah huh suckah out of huh with his big peckahl! It's Royal that's cost me this suckahl!"

"Of course you smell musk!" Frances cried desperately. "Why wouldn't you? Do you think a girl can go through what Princess has gone through tonight . . . lose a baby . . . then keep hemorrhaging . . . and not throw off musk? What do you expect? After all, she is a Negro, isn't she? Or are you going to ignore that fact because it suits your purpose? I smell it too . . . I've been smelling it . . . I've probably got it on me," she continued because she must, before he smelled the odor on her and went berserk, "because I've been handling her!"

"Why'nt you call Gingah?" he demanded. "How come you did niggah's wu'hk?"

"Do you want every slave on the plantation to know what happened?" she cried. "Do you want them to know

Princess lost her baby with what you did in the stud-pen? This way, nobody knows it but us!"

"How you goin' keep Gingah f'um findin' out?" Lee demanded. "She got huh nose in evahthing. They's meals, foah instance . . . how you goin' to get grub up heah to the wench . . . what explanation you got that'll satisfy Gingah, that'll keep huh f'um bein' suspicious?"

"Princess and I are sewing," Frances replied, shaking at her narrow escape, willing her mind to work fast. "Ginger knows that. Well, we'll be too busy sewing to come down to meals. Ginger will send our trays up by Bax. I'll take them in at the door."

"An' have Gingah gossipin' that the mistress is locked into huh chambah?" Lee countered.

"That didn't bother you when I really was locked in," Frances retorted. "If you're worried about that, I'll come down to meals . . . have Princess' tray sent up. She'll be too busy to go to the kitchen. Ginger needs to know nothing more. I can manage it, Lee."

He began that sniffing again. "I don' b'lieve that stud wasn' in this chambah," he growled. "I'd know his musk anywheah . . . an' that's his musk . . . not wench musk, an' not blood."

"Are you out of your mind?" Frances cried, frantically trying to divert him. "How could he get out of the stud-pen? They're locked in at night, and I've seen the bars at the windows!"

"It happens," he told her fiercely, "it happens. I'm goin' straight to the pen. If he's theah, I'll make him confess."

"Lee," she cried, "stay with me . . . I . . . please . . . I've been frightened, here alone with Princess!" She held her breath, hoping he would believe her and stay, desperate to keep him from finding out that Royal was missing from the pen.

"An' if he ain' theah," Lee went on, "I'm gittin' the

dogs an' hunting' him down, an' I'm goin' to execute him. If he's run, I'm satisfied he done this."

Before Frances could speak again he was gone.

She ran to the door and locked it. As she turned back, Royal bounded through the window to Princess. He lifted her in his arms; her head fell back, her red hair swaying and catching the lamplight.

"Put her back!" Frances whispered.

"No, Mistress," he said, "I'm taking her." He turned toward the window and Frances sped after him, stood barring his way.

"She can die, Royall" she whispered urgently. "You can't go running into the swamp, carrying her! At least put her on the bed and let me examine her! If that bleeding starts again . . . how would you know, in the dark, in the swamp . . . with hounds after you? You heard him, didn't you?"

"I heard," he said. "You're right, Mistress. I can't just take her like this." Tenderly he laid her back on the bed.

Swiftly Frances examined her. The pulse was faint, but the bleeding had not increased. As she pulled the sheet up, Princess opened her eyes again. "Where is Royal?" she asked.

He sat on the bed and cupped her face in his hands. "I'm heah," he said.

"You've got to run," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, "we both got to. Tonight, as best we can."

"Yes," he agreed, "we both got to. Tonight, as best we can."

"Just you, Royal," Frances insisted. "Princess has to stay in bed, keep the bleeding down, have good, nourishing food."

"I'll wait. I'll hide."

"Where?" she demanded. "And for how long? I know it isn't much of a plan, Royal, but your only chance is to

get to Boston and wait. I'll nurse Princess back to health and when she is well, we'll come to Boston."

He sat stroking Princess' brow, gazing at her with his great, limpid dark eyes, and she at him.

"Please," the girl whispered. "Do as Miss Frances says." At last he nodded.

Suddenly there came the slam of a door downstairs.

"Now!" Frances urged. "My husband has found his keys are missing, and he's gone for the overseer! In a few minutes he'll know you're not in the stud-pen!"

She watched Royal put his lips to Princess' lips. He surged to his feet, started for the window.

"Wait!" Frances cried softly, and he halted. "He'll expect you to be running already," she said, "into the woods . . . the swamp. He'll get the dogs on your trail . . . you won't have a chance!"

"What do I do if I don't run?" he asked simply.

"You must stay here," she decided. "Come!"

Cautiously she unlocked the door, cracked it open. "Follow me," she whispered, tiptoed out and made for the attic stair. "Close the door," she whispered.

Through darkness she led, opened the stair door and tiptoed up, whispering for him to close that door as well. The blackness in the stairway was absolute, the air stagnant. She climbed swiftly, aware of Royal's presence only from his musk. She led across the vast, reaching blackness of the attic, her bare feet soundless on the wide, rough boards, turned the knob of the little door and stood aside.

"In there," she whispered. "There are mattresses . . . candles . . . friction matches. But there's a little window, too . . . a light could be seen."

"I won't risk a light," he said.

"You'll be safe here for a time," she told him. "They can take the dogs out now and not find your spoor in the swamp. Later, when they organize a search party and

go deeper in, you can start . . . in the opposite direction."

"Thank you, Mistress," Royal whispered.

She stifled the impulse to put her hands on him. Almost she asked for his healing love again, but there was no time; at any moment Lee might come charging back to search again for his keys which he must not find in her room.

Swiftly she stole down the steps to her chamber. Princess was asleep. Frances got the keys from the bottom of her armoire, hurried down the curving stairway in the darkness and into the kitchen. At the gallery door she paused.

She could hear nothing. Apparently, then, Lee was at the overseer's cottage yet. She slipped down the gallery steps and flung the keys as far away into the darkness as she could. Now, she thought, let them be found. Let Lee try to learn who stole them, how they got there.

She fumbled about the kitchen, quickly assembling a packet of bread and cheese, lifted a wooden bucket of water, and toiled to the attic. Royal had his door shut.

She scratched on it. "It's the mistress," she said, very low.

He opened the door and she guided his big, warm hand to the handle of the bucket. "There's a jar under the window," she whispered. "Pour the water into it, and I'll take the bucket back to the kitchen. I'm putting food on the chair. I'll bring more food and a little gold before you leave."

"Thank you," he whispered back.

"When my husband returns," she said, "he'll probably talk a good deal. If you can hide here until he does talk, I may be able to find out where the nearest underground depot is."

"I have heard of such depots," Royal said.

"He'll go to such a depot searching for you," she whispered. "But he'll talk first . . . that is his nature.

And if he does talk, we'll know approximately where the depot is and when he goes to it, so that you won't reach it at the time he does."

"Yes," Royal agreed, speaking in what she recognized as his king-tone. "Your plan is good. You know how to think. Princess will be safer with you at this time than with me."

She took the empty bucket and ran downstairs to the kitchen. Then she ran back to Princess, who was sleeping quietly.

CHAPTER 16

LEE Hunnicutt at this moment was ranging the length of the musky stud-pen, his rage burning and building. It was getting out of control and he knew it and was helpless to manage it.

Slocum stood at the door, holding a lantern in one hand, a pistol in the other. The trustees, Happ and Bone, stood gaping on either side of Slocum.

"Speak up!" Hunnicutt ordered loudly for the twentieth time. "Who come in heah an' unspaneled that niggah stud an' tuhned him loose? Who stole my stud-keys out of my libr'y?"

"They wouldn't have no way of knowing who was in yer library, Mister Hunnicutt," Slocum said.

"That's right, they wouldn'," Hunnicutt agreed angrily, "but they suah-hell know who come in heah an' unspancled that king-niggah! An' I aim to git it out of 'em if I have to peel the hide off evah one of theah backs! This is one time they ain' goin' to get away with theah favorite nigra trick of not tellin' on each othah! They eithah tell, or they ah dead niggahs!"

"Maybe it was someone they skeered to name," Slocum suggested.

Hunnicutt wheeled on his overseer. "What you mean by that? What you insinuatins' . . . who'd they be scaihaed to name?"

"How'd I know?" countered the overseer. "We examined the spancels of ev'ry nigger in this pen, and they

was all locked. Only Royal's is loose—unlocked, not busted. I'm just tryin' to think of ev'ry possibility, same as you."

"They ain' no slaves got the run of the house 'cept Bax an' Gingah an' the cleanin' wenches," reasoned Hunnicut, "an' that Princess wench." He halted, considering. Princess could have stolen the keys and set Royal free . . . indeed, she was the logical suspect. But he knew that Princess had been in no condition to do anything of the sort this night. "It wasn' none of them," he decided aloud. "That's foah suah." He turned to Slocum. "Bring that lantahn ovah heah," he ordered. "Shine it on Guy. Him an' I is goin' to have a lil' chat."

Slocum clumped to Guy's bunk and held the lantern so the light fell across the big fighter. His skin was so black, even with the light on it, that it seemed to melt into the surrounding blackness. But the whites of his eyes were showing, very big and rolling.

Hunnicutt bore down on the big fighter. "You wan' to fight ag'in?" he demanded.

"Yas, suh . . . Mastah . . . Guy wan' to fight."

"You wan' to covah a wench ag'in?"

"Yas, suh . . . Mastah . . . Guy wan' to covah a wench!"

"Then tell me who unspancled that king-niggah. You right across fum his shelf."

"Guy don' know, Mastah," quavered the heavy voice.

"Somebody did . . . ain' that right?"

"Yas, suh . . . Mastah . . . somebody done it, Guy know dat, but dat all Guy know," whined the fighter.

"How come you don' know who it was?"

"It was dahk, Mastah . . . suh . . . Guy couldn' see."

"You kin heah, can't you?"

"Yas, suh . . . Mastah . . . Guy heah right good."

"What'd you heah when this somebody come into the pen?"

"A whispah, suh . . . Mastah . . . dat de truth. All Guy heah was whispahs, an' whoevah it was unspancled dat king-buck . . . an' dey lef' togethah . . . an' dey lock de doah to de pen!"

"What did the whispah say?" Hunnicutt pressed.

"Guy don' know, mastah . . . suh. Guy jus' heah whispah . . . no wohds."

Hunnicutt turned on his heel, made for the shelf to which Silas, the old shoemaker, was spancled. Slocum brought the lantern and shone it on the usually placid but now worried, lined, brown face.

"Silas, you on the shelf right beside that king-buck, ain' that so?" Hunnicutt asked.

"Yas, Mastah," said the old shoemaker, nodding.

"Did you heah the same whispah Guy heard?"

"No, Mastah."

"An' why not?" demanded Hunnicutt. "You gittin' deaf . . . am I goin' to have to sell you off 'count of you can't heah?"

"I not gittin' deaf, Mastah," said Silas quietly. "I was 'sleep, I reckon."

"Asleep?" yelled Hunnicutt. "You s'pect me to b'lieve that? How the hell could any of you be asleep aftah you'd just seen them wenches covahed? Tell me that, ol' niggah . . . think up an ansawah to that!"

"Silas can' think but the truth, Mastah," the slave replied. "I was 'sleep, Mastah. I too ol' to be disturbed at seein' no wenches covahed. If Mastah remembahs, Silas ain't bin able to covah no wench foah ten, twelve yeahs, suh. Silas bin makin' shoes an' doin' nothin' else, an' he go to sleep when he stretch out on he shelf come dahk time."

"He's right," Slocum grunted. "He ain't covered no wenches since I been here, and that's two years."

Doggedly, Hunnicutt questioned Bill, the slave spancled to the shelf on the other side of Royal, and learned

nothing further. He turned in exasperation on the two trustees. His rage consumed him, swept him along on its wild flames, and he could not control it.

"That leaves you two," he said hotly. "Which one was it?"

"Mister Hunnicutt," Slocum put in, "Happ or Bone . . . neither one would have no reason to unsprangle that nigger! And they ain' got the run of yer house. How the hell could they git them keys? Also, they was locked into the trustee-pen when I got 'em just now!"

"I don' know how any of this happened," Hunnicutt yelled, "but it happened! Hol' that lantahs so's I kin see they damn, wuthless faces! I'm goin' fin' out who don' this thing, an' I'm of the opinion one of these niggahs has to know who done it! An' I'm makin' him talk, or I'll pick his guts out, piece by piece!"

"Mister Hunnicutt," argued the overseer. "Why don't we git the dogs out? Ketch afore he does more than git into the swamp good."

Hunnicutt heard the words but in his rage paid no attention. He stared into Happ's face. The big slave was reddish brown, with a good deal of Mandinga blood in him. He couldn't meet the master's glare, but let his gaze slip away the way they all did. Then Hunnicutt stared into Bone's face, and the second trustee, bigger and heavier than Happ, stared stolidly just past his eyes.

"Talk!" Hunnicutt raged. "What you know 'bout this, Bone?"

"Bone know nothin'," said the trusty.

"You, then . . . you Happ!" Hunnicutt gritted. "You the one cahhies the keys aroun' foah Mista Slocum sometimes, ain' you?"

"Yas, suh Mastah," admitted Happ unhappily.

"An' you like the feel of those keys, don't you?"

"I reckon, suh. Mastah."

"You got to likin' 'em so much that you sweet-talked one of the cleanin' wenches at the big house to git you

my keys so's you could tote 'em 'roun' . . . ain' that right?"

"No, Mastah . . . Happ nevah done it!" moaned the slave.

"An' then you plotted with that king-buck to unlock him an' set him loose . . . didn' you?"

"What he promise you, that king-buck? He promise gol?"

"He nevah promise Happ nothin', Mastah!" cried Happ.

"So you was doin' it free . . . or was he goin' fix it so's you covah one of his harem wenches? Ain' you satisfied I let you covah that Princess wench tonight . . . ain' you?"

"Happ, satisfy, Mastah . . . Happ happy ovah it. Please!"

"Lock him in the jail," Hunnicutt ordered the overseer. "Git that othah trustee, that Cat. We'll git the dogs, the foah of us, an' run that niggah down. An'when we git back, I'll deal with Happ."

Within ten minutes the buck-pen was locked, Happ was spanceled in the jail, and Hunnicutt, Slocum, and the trustee, Bone, and Cat, a stocky, powerful black, made their way to the kennels behind the overseer's cottage. Slocum fastened leads to the hounds and came out of the kennel area with the four of them excitedly lunging and whining and baying.

"We got to git something with his spoor on it, so they kin track," Slocum said. "But I don't know what to git. He hasn't got but one pair of breeches and he's wearin' them."

"His shelf in the pen," Hunnicutt decided.

So they returned to the stud-pen, this time with the dogs. The hounds snuffled over the shelf, whining and letting out eager yelps. Some of the bucks moaned and lamented.

Then, plunging against their leashes, the hounds pulled

the overseer out of the pen and straight to the plantation house, the others following. Slocum hauled the dogs back from the gallery, though they yelped and bayed.

"They must of got yer spoor 'round that shelf, Mister Hunnicutt," said the overseer.

"He ain' in the house, the damned beasts!" swore Hunnicutt. "Ain' but my wife an' that wench of huh's in theah. Even if he had of bin in the house, he's gone now. He's made foah the swamp . . . le's take the dogs on thatway . . . the minute they git his spoor they'll remembah it."

Yanking at the hounds, forcing them away from the house, Slocum headed for the swamp, Hunnicutt right behind him with the pistol. One of the trustees carried the lantern and the other carried chains. Now the hounds were running with their noses to the ground, circling as much as their leads permitted, searching for spoor, yelping and whining.

"Damned stupid dogs!" Hunnicutt raged as they walked. "Ain' they evah goin' to pick him up?"

"If he come this way, they'll smell him out," Slocum replied. "They still got yer spoor on their mind . . . the minute they git his, they'll remember it from the pen and we'll be making time after him. We'll run across his track somewheres . . . if not this direction, then another."

They went down the back drive which wound past Lida's cottage and on, into the swamp. Slocum ranged to each side of the lane, forcing the dogs, hither and yon. They strained and lunged, snuffing along the ground, whining and yelping, and Hunnicutt trudged after, his rage at a seething boil.

Suddenly it began to rain. Rain sliced down in great, drowning walls. Slocum came to a stop; the dogs sat on their haunches, water streaming from them, dejected and mournful in the lantern light.

"I reckon it ain't much use now, sir," the overseer said. "They can't track in this rain. It's already sluiced away spoor the nigger laid down."

"We'll go back," Hunnicutt said coldly. "Put the dogs in the kennels. We'll git up a search pahty when the rain lets up. Meanwhile, we'll wuhk on that Happ niggah we got in the jail."

CHAPTER 17

"YOU bring them whips an' knives?" Hunnicutt asked as the overseer unlocked the jail door. The rain was pouring harder, and they were all drenched.

"Got 'em when I got the extry lanterns," Slocum replied. "Even had Cat pick up a jug of pimentade and a rag."

Hunnicutt grunted approval and stepped through the door as the overseer pushed it open. Water streamed from his clothes and puddled on the puncheon floor. The others followed, the lanterns instantly lighting the interior of the jail with its shelf-bunks, two to each side of the room.

Happ was spanceled to a shelf opposite the door. The whites of his eyes were enormous, swallowing the rolling dark pupils as he stared from the master to the overseer to the trustees and the equipment for punishment which they carried.

"Mastah," he pleaded, forgetting that a slave was not permitted to speak to the master until spoken to. "Happ didn' do nothin' like the mastah think! Happ was lock' up in de cabin with Bone an' Cat . . . dey kin tell Mastah dat Happ was with dem de whole time! Happ nevah lef' dat trustee-pen, Mastah, an' dat de truth!"

"The truth's what I am to git out of you," Hunnicutt said hotly. "I'm givin' you youah las' chance to tell the truth . . . right now!"

"Dey ain' but de one truth, Mastah!" cried the big

trustee. "Happ was in de trustee-pen 'til Mistah Slocum come aftah him an' Bone to he'p 'bout de runaway slavel! Dat's de on'y truth dey is, Mastah! Happ didn' have nufin' to do with unlockin' dat Royall!"

"It don't make sense that he could of," Slocum put in.

"None of this makes sense," Hunnicutt retorted, "but I got a black missin'! Spancel Happ to the centah post."

Slocum advanced on the big, cringing black and began to unlock his irons. Hunnicutt watched, feeling empty in the stomach. Why the hell was a man forced to go through with a thing like this? Why should he have to order whippins and, as in this case, sure torture for even a black? Why couldn't a master somehow pound it through their thick skulls that if they'd just obey the master and do their work conscientiously, they'd never be severely punished or made an example of?

He listened to the rain pound and stream over the roof of the jail. The overseer shoved the big slave toward the center of the room.

"Shuck down," Hunnicutt ordered.

The big black hands fumbled at the breeches, let them drop. The buck stepped out of them and, at a prod from Slocum, backed up to the center post. The overseer yanked his hands back so his wrists encircled the post and snapped a lock onto his wrist chains.

"Ankles, too," Hunnicutt said, "an' his middle below the belly-button, just' above the hips."

The big, heavey-boned body began to quiver as the overseer chained it. The whites of the eyes grew and the pupils rolled.

"Please, Mastah," begged Happ, "don' do it . . . don' whup Happ! Happ didn' do nothin' bad . . . Happ won' nevah do nothin' bad!"

"I ain' goin' to waste time whippin'," Hunnicutt said, sick of the whole thing. But he couldn't quit. He had to find out how Royal got out of the stud-pen so nothing like it would ever happen again. And if a nigra wouldn't

talk, he had to be dealt with. "Slocum," he said, "git the knife . . . no, not that one . . . the othah one . . . it's longah an' thinnah an' shahpah."

Now Happ's jaw was shaking, his big lips banging together, bouncing apart, hanging and shaking, saliva drooling down the sides of his chin. "M-mastah . . ." he stammered, scarcely able to speak because of his shaking jaws, "not de knife . . . please, Mastah!"

"Prick him in the belly, Mistah Slocum," ordered Hunnicutt wearily. "Prick him good an' vig'rous. Let him know it a knife youah wieldin'."

"Mister Hunnicutt," Slocum said, face expressionless. "I'd ruther not."

"You wuhkin' foah me, Mistah Slocum?" Hunnicutt asked, his voice as expressionless as the overseer's face. "Or you not wuhkin' foah me?"

"I value my job," Slocum said tightly.

"Then prick him, Mistah Slocum . . . prick him right smaht in the belly."

The overseer swiftly jabbed the point of the knife into the middle of the black belly. Happ cried out, a startled, pain-filled sound. Blood spurted and welled; it ran down the black skin to the mat of black wool in which was rooted the big black penis.

Hunnicutt's stomach contracted; his own manhood stirred heavily. He pressed his teeth together to steady his jaw. Happ's shaking jaw had stilled; his big mouth was open and twisted and big tears were running down his chin and dropping off.

"You ready to talk now?" Hunnicutt demanded. "You willin' to confess them keys?"

"Happ nevah had no keys," moaned the trustee, his tears faster. "Happ nevah done nuf'in' but what de mastah say or Mistah Slocum say! Happ nevah do nuf'in' else . . . Happ 'us happy doin' what he s'pose' to dol"

"You happy bein' a trustee?" asked Hunnicutt, his

stomach rolling. "Twist that knife some, Mistah Slocum."

"No!" screamed Happ as the overseer gave the point of the knife a vigorous twist. "Please . . . no . . . !"

"You nevah ansawahed me—you like bein' a trusty?"

"Yas, Mastah . . . Happ like . . . oh, please . . ."

"Then tell how you got that Royal-nigga loose!" said Hunnicutt.

His nuts were hurting; his penis was throbbing with heavy desire. All he wanted was to get this over, no matter how.

"Happ nevah don' it . . . nevah!" wept the slave.

"Cut his belly open . . . top to bottom," Hunnicutt ordered, his voice thick with rage that the black would push him into doing what he didn't want to do but must do to keep all the slaves under control. "Pick his guts out—one by one."

He stood through the sight of gushing blood, the smell of it; stood through Happ's dying screams. He stood and watched while Slocum, iron-faced, picked out the small guts and let them hang, picked out the big gut. He stood and watched every drop of it; he watched the great body give its death-jerk. He listened to the rain wail and weep.

"He done it," he said thinly into the rain-thick silence which followed the mighty, dying screams. "He cost me a fifteen hundred dollah suckah, he cost me my prize stud, an' now I'm out the eighteen hundred dollahs I could of sol' Happ himse'f foah. Is it any wondah I'm a disgusted man? Hang him out by the pig pen so's evah slave on the plantation gits a chance to see what happens when they goes ag'in the mastah. Then dig a hole somewheah an' put him in it befoah he commence to stink."

After additional orders to a grimly silent Slocum, he stalked out of the jail, the smell of blood and death filling him, and hastened toward the house, fighting the

need to vomit. His need for a woman was raging, had never been stronger or more painful, though he had sported with both wenches earlier.

He took the stairs to the second floor three at a time, burst into Frances' room without knocking. Here there was the warm yellow glow of lamplight and instead of the stink of musk and blood, the sharp, clean odor of soap and the fragrance of cologne.

Frances turned from the mirror, hairbrush in hand. "Well?" she asked. "Did you find him . . . did you catch your runaway slave?"

"Not yet," he replied shortly. "Git on the bed, Frances." She blanched, and this angered him further. "Damnit," he cried, "I'm youah husban' . . . remembah? Not youah executioner!"

"Princess is in the bed," she told him.

"Git huh out! If she sleeps in youah chambah at all, she sleeps on the floah!"

"After she's well," Frances maintained. "She's resting now . . . sound asleep. If I move her, and she starts to hemorrhage again . . . she just cannot afford to lose any more blood, Lee."

Though her resistance enraged him, he determined, in the midst of rage, to lose no more slaves over tonight's affair. Dropping the matter, he gestured roughly at the daybed, placed along the foot of the big bed. "Lay down there," he said.

She moved the screen so it stood between the beds, then lay down without speaking. He lunged down upon her, plunged into her more violently than ever before. Her stifled cry spurred him, and he began to ride savagely.

And when he had unloaded his passion and his rage and his revulsions, he staggered onto the gallery, leaned over the rail and vomited for a very long time.

The rain beat endlessly on his head, streamed endlessly over the earth.

CHAPTER 18

WHEN he had been in his room for a time, Frances went to him. She was tremulous lest he somehow find out it was she who had freed Royal, yet she had to go, learn what had happened tonight, and what his plans were. Also, he had been very ill on the gallery; she had stood beside him, wondering what caused such nausea.

He was in bed, fat black Wally in attendance.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"To know how you feel, Lee. And suggest we call a doctor tomorrow."

"I feel weak, what you think!" Lee snapped. "An' I don' wan' no doctah. I'm jus' restin' in bed foah a spell. I vomited 'cause it tuhned my stomach to have to kill a black, is all. It's happened, one time or another, to ev'ry man on the Delta."

"What slave did you kill?" she cried, alarmed lest the killing had been a result of what she had done.

"It ain' youah business," he said, "but I'd as soon Wally know right f'um the mastah's mouth. So's he kin be a good niggah an' escape the same thing. It was Happ . . . one of the trustees. He got into my lib'ry an' stole my keys to the stud-pens an' let that king-stud loose, an' he refused to confess how he done it."

"So you killed him," Frances said flatly.

"I gave him his chance . . . ovah an' ovah. I asked him to tell me how he don' it . . . how he got the keys . . . an' if he'd tol' me, an' tol' me why, an' why

he he'ped that slave escape, I might not of executed him. I might of jus' cut his tongue out an' sol' him off to wu'k cotton in Alabama."

"I don't suppose it ever occurred to you," Frances cried, reckless of how he might take it, "that he couldn't tell you how he stole your keys and unlocked the pen, because he actually did not do it?"

"He done it . . . he had to do it," Lee said doggedly. "They wasn' no one else could of done it. 'Cept that wench you got, an' I know she didn't do it."

His words struck Frances silent. Guilt rose and raged in her. She was more to blame for the trustee's death than Lee, for she had brought it about. Almost, she blurted out the truth, then stopped the first word on a gasp. If she confessed now, the result could very well be Royal's death. I've started this whole horrible thing, she thought miserably. I've got to see it through.

"I'm gittin' up a search pahty," Lee said. "Slocum's ridin' to the neighbors now, in the rain . . . alertin' 'em. They'll begin comin' any time . . . they'll all be heah foah early breakfu's, an' we'll take the dogs out soon's this damn rain lets up. Way it washin' away the niggah's spoor now, no tellin' when we'll track him down.

"They should be able to pick up the spoor wherever he is after the rain," Frances ventured.

"Suah," Lee said testily, "an' that kin take houahs. You heah how they hung 'roun' the house earlier? I tol' you that niggah was heah . . . the wench was in youah chambah . . . an' he was aftah huh, one way or anothah . . . befoah he took off."

"Not in my room," Frances lied stonily.

"We'll go into that latah, aftah we ketch him," Lee said impatiently. "He's boun' to of anyhow looked into youah window. He may be bogged down in the swamp a'ready . . . stuck in quicksan' . . . an' we'll have a hell of a time findin' him. Come to think of it, we'll make fu'st foah that house up towahds New Orleans that's s'posed

to be an undahgroun' depot. We kin go in the rain foah that."

"He might go there?" Frances asked, and held her breath.

"Lots of 'em do git to the depots," he replied. "This house sets between two swamps, or rathah it's on the on'y dry piece of groun' in a swampy section on the south road. He's liable to stumble onto it goin' through the swamp."

"How do you take him?" pressed Frances.

"Jus' ketch him . . . like any slave . . . or runaway ho'se. If he ends up at the depot they'll hide him all day, not move him befoah dahk comes ag'in. In fact, soon's a couple of men git heah, I'll go theah an' wait, jus' in case."

Frances shuddered involuntarily at the poor prospects of any runaway slave. Lee didn't miss the shudder.

"No," he said, "it ain' a puhty pictuah. Now, mebbe you commencin' to see that a slave ownah has his problems, that these blacks really are animals, an' they ain' no trustin' 'em. Folks up north think all we do is sit aroun' on ouah galleries an' be waited on han' an' foot by faithful blacks. Couldn' be anythin' moah wrong. Actually, we wu'k hahdah tryin' to get these lazy, no-count niggahs to do jus' a smidgin of honest laboh . . . enough to pay foah theah salt . . . than we'd wu'k if we done it ouahse'fs. I'm grateful you had this opportunity to see what a hahd time the slave ownah has, an' how unjust it is to considah him unfeelin' an' cruel. You saw foah youase'f how sick my own sternness made me tonight, an' you re'lize that tomorrow I got to go on a slavehunt to boot . . . today actually . . . an' no tellin' what'll happen."

"Yes, Lee," Frances said, "I see everything you've told me. Indeed I do."

"As time goes on," he said, his tone considerably mollified, "you'll change youah min' about the slaves. You'll

discovah they can' take care of theahse'fs even if they was freed. You a sensible woman . . . I give you credit."

"Yes, Lee," Frances said again.

"You bes' run along to bed," he told her. "I'm goin' to git a mite of sleep . . . I got a hahd time befoah me."

She fled, shaken at the thing he had said, appalled at his thinking. She closed her bedroom door and leaned against it, looking at Princess, who was still sleeping. Then she sat down in a chair near a window, listened to the rain sluice heavily and endlessly down, and planned.

No neighbors had come riding up; she thought perhaps they were waiting for the rain to slacken. Twice Princess stirred and Frances went to her. Each time the girl turned her head restlessly, slept on. Her skin felt moist and cool. With proper rest and food, Frances thought, she would recover.

The hours boomed out on the big clock downstairs. The gong struck three. At three-thirty, Frances opened her door and looked up and down the hallway, a lamp in her hand. All the doors were closed, and no sound came from behind them. The entire house was silent except for the drumming rain.

She went to her dresser, took up a handkerchief into which she had tied half her small hoard of gold, went barefoot into the hallway, pulling the door noiselessly shut. Soundless as a shadow, she sped along the hallway to the enclosed stair, up it and across the attic to Royal's door.

She scratched on it, turned the knob and entered. "It's me . . . Frances Hunnicutt."

"Yes, Mistress," Royal whispered from the darkness.

The rain was much louder up here, close to the roof. She thrust the linen-wrapped gold into his hand. Whispering, she told him of the execution, the search party, and Lee's plan to go to the underground depot first.

"I got to get out of heah," Royal whispered. "I heard the dogs . . . they got my spoor at the house, and the

mastah thought they had his spoor. Next time, the dogs may lead right up heah to the attic."

"I know," she agreed. "Maybe, to be safe, you should leave now—the rain will wash away your spoor as fast as you lay it down. You could hide in the cave Princess and I found until they go to the underground depot, then make your run."

Swiftly she described the cave to him. Next she told him as best she could the general location of the underground depot.

"If you try for the underground," she said, "give the master time to go there and come away. Or you could be covering distance through the swamp in another direction. At least you have several possible courses—to hide in the cave, to keep going through the swamp, to try the road, to try for the underground. You'll have to choose which seems best when the time comes."

"Mistress," whispered Royal, "thank you. Princess—will you tell her that I will come back for her? That one day I will come, that she can expect me?"

"You mean you'll kidnap her?" Frances asked.

"What is 'kidnap,' Mistress?"

She told him.

"Yes," he whispered. "I will kidnap my queen."

CHAPTER 19

THEY waited until the clock struck four, then Frances stole to the head of the staircase and listened. There was no movement below.

She returned to the little room. "Have you got your food . . . do you need more?"

"There's enough, Mistress," he whispered back.

"Follow me," she breathed and made for the stairway again, sliding her bare feet noiselessly along the floor, knowing he was doing the same, for there was no sound other than the drumming rain.

Down the stair they went, Royal pulling the door quietly shut. Along the carpeted corridor and into Frances' room they stole, and here she locked the door.

Royal stopped at the bed, lightly kissed Princess. She smiled, and did not rouse. He looked at Frances and nodded.

She gestured and hastened to the window which he had used before. "Go to the right," she whispered. "That way you don't pass the master's room, and no one sleeps in any of the others. Follow the gallery to the steps. And Royal—"

He stood waiting.

"If you can't come for Princess within three months," she whispered, "go to Boston. When I leave here, which should be sooner than you can return, I'll bring Princess to Boston. Walk in front of a waterfront restaurant called

The Clam every Sunday morning at nine o'clock. If she's in Boston. she'll be there."

"Thank you, Mistress," Royal whispered.

Silently he moved to the right, to the corner, on to the next corner, down the stairway. At the foot he stood for a few moments, peering into the dark, pouring rain, listening into its clatter for any other sound, feeling into it for any danger, sensing none. Lightly he went in his loping walk away from the house, the gold in one hand, the food in the other.

Now the rain enveloped him like a garment, streaming over his head and bare chest and arms, saturating his breeches. He stepped onto the grass, which felt sodden and matted beneath his soles. Keeping to trees, rose bushes and rose trellises even in the pouring darkness, he made his way across the back garden to the lane which led away from the river. There was no glimmer of light in the house behind him, in any cabin or pen, no sound from man or slave or dog.

He would make first for the cave the mistress had told him about. This was a fairly short trip through the inky wet rain; if he could find the cave, he'd reconnoiter in comparative safety, decide whether to hide there until the master had time to make the fruitless trip to the underground, return and set out with the dogs, or to set a course for Boston on his own.

He could sense the swamp on each side as he walked, keeping to the grassy edges of the lane so as not to leave footprints in mud. The rain was almost cold, and it pounded his skin so hard it made a little stinging sensation. He could see nothing, just an occasional bulk of bush or tree, but he knew he was going in the right direction.

"Follow the lane away from the river," the mistress had stressed. "A little over a mile back is an old house, and beyond that, with a swamp creeping up on both sides, are the ruins of another house, and in the ruins is

this cave. The stream that runs through the cave leads out, into the swamp . . . and the stream runs through the swamp I don't know how far.

On he slogged, blinded by the rain. It was hard to hold his eyes open. He longed to close them as he walked, but that he could not do. He must watch through the raining blackness, make out the ruins for which he was bound.

He did not how much distance the white man allowed to a mile, so could not be sure how far he had now come. He slowed, turning his head from side to side, seeking the outline of the old house he would pass before he came to the ruins.

On he prowled through the night, sometimes lifting a hand to dash rain from his face. It was slanting relentlessly out of the sky like a great, slicing blade, but he rejoiced in it. It was his weapon against pursuit, against the dogs.

There seemed to be a bulk off to the right. He took a few steps, stopped. Straining, he made out a dark spot which was different in outline from bush clumps and trees. His heart lifted. This, then, was either the old house or the ruins. He was on the right path.

He moved cautiously toward the hulk. He had to find out what it was. He pushed through the rain, swiping it repeatedly from his eyes. Yes . . . it was a house . . . or the remains of a house . . . he could not tell at this distance. He continued to advance with hands outstretched. His fingers touched rough, splintery board. He moved his hands along the board, silently treading the streaming grass underfoot.

Now his hands slid onto glass, making a distinct thud. He froze. A window. His heart grew hot and raced. This was the house the mistress had spoken of, not the ruins. This was where the cousin of the master lived. She was white, she was southern, she would turn him in.

He turned swiftly, knowing now which way to go,

concerned only with getting away from here. After two steps, a presence which he could not see materialized in his path. He could feel the presence, or at least he felt the cold, hard prod of a gun-barrel ramming his chest.

"Jus' stan' quiet," ordered a low, rich voice, almost as rich as that of a wench. "Stan' still until I fin' out who you are."

Her hand, the one not holding the weapon, felt his chest, his arm. "You a nigra," she said, "ain' that right? You don' need to answah . . . I know a nigra when I feel one, an' smell that musk. What you doin' heah?"

He stood rigid. If he knocked her down, he could grab the gun and run. That is, if she didn't pull trigger at his slightest move. She still had one hand on his arm, and she'd be able to feel a move before it started and could pull that trigger. But if it worked, if he got the gun, he'd be armed. He couldn't go to the ruins, but he couldn't go there now in any case, because she'd found him. He'd have to break and run with the pistol—he was sure it was a pistol—bear a course for Boston, forget about the underground.

"You goin' to answah me, boy?" asked the throaty voice.

"I got nothin' to say, Miss."

She moved the pistol, keeping it against him, moved it around his side and square between his shoulders. "Mahchl!" she ordered. "Straight ahead! You goin' into my house wheah I kin git a look at you an' see what I got myse'f in the rain, 'cause I suah as the dickens didn' git what I bin lookin' foah!"

He walked, sloshing through puddles, turned when she told him to turn, pushed a door open when she said to push it open, and they entered the house. She prodded him across the room and he came up against a table in the dark, striking his thigh smartly.

She chuckled. "Feel 'roun'," she ordered. "You'll fin' friction matches . . . light the lamp!"

He felt around the table, first touching a cup, then a spoon, finally a lamp and later the matches. He struck one, held it to the wick until it caught, fitted the chimney into place. The room glowed with soft light.

The white girl was beautiful, even pointing her pistol at him, her hair plastered flat and dark and dripping. Her features were clear and sweet, her body lovely. Her dress was as nothing, thin and wet and clinging to her long, lovely thighs, outlining her womanhood and even her big, upstanding nipples.

Her eyes were tawny, like the eyes of a jungle lion, and every bit as wild as they admired him—more, perhaps, than most women dared admire. This one was with wildness. He felt her wild sex-want for him, felt a stir in his man-parts.

"Youah Royal," she said. "I've seen you when Cousin Lee had you runnin' the fiel's to keep youah muscles hahd. Well . . . they hahd, all right. What you doin' heah, Royal? Sneakin' along my house in the dahk? Did that wench Princess die . . . did she?"

"No, Miss," Royal replied, stunned. How did this white girl, living in this house more than a mile from the big house . . . and on such a stormy, rainy night . . . know about Princess?

"I reckon you wondah why I know," she said, as if he had asked. "It all ovah you . . . on youah face, an' in youah eyes. Well, I bin out in the rain all night . . . I got me a reason to keep watch of all goin's on at Hunnicutt Hill when it rains at night. So, when I foun' all them rain clouds in the sky, I took my pistol foah protection, an' I watched that plantation house. I know theah was a fight in a stud-pen, an' that you must have been in that pen. 'Cause latah you come up missin' . . . didn' you, Royal?"

He nodded, staring.

"I know that my cousin Lee had the mulatto wench

. . . Princess . . . an' that Pansy wench brought to the pen, an' that they was used . . . ain' that right?"

When he did not reply, could not, because there was a violent knot in his throat, she moved the pistol threateningly. "Ain' it?" she demanded, and he nodded.

"An' I know aftah that the wench was sick and the mistress took care of huh. Did she lose a suckah . . . was that it?"

Again he nodded.

"Youah suckah?"

"I was the only stud put to Princess, Miss," he said, avoiding a direct lie, avoiding the danger of implicating the white overseer, for no matter how wild this girl was, she was still white. And whites always aligned themselves with other whites, no matter what.

"Know how I knew she lost a suckah?" asked the girl. Not waiting for reply, she plunged on. "I was lookin' in the window, that's how! An' I was still theah an' I followed when the fine new mistress went runnin' to the stud-pen an' brought you back to the big house. An' I was at the window when you pleasuahed the mistress, an' when Cousin Lee come stompin' in, I shinnied down the post an' hid while you hid on the gallery! So you see, I know considahble moah than Cousin Lee knows! I know too that youah now a runaway slave, an' that the mistress hid you somewheah in the house, prob'ly the attic. Latah, I hid outside Cousin Lee's room an' heahd him tell his Yankee bride that he executed a trustee."

Royal stood dumbfounded under this girl's knowledge. His instinct was to bolt, but he dared not, for she kept the pistol leveled at him, her hand steady.

"I've bin havin' me a night," she said, "an' I'm still havin' it. Cousin Lee's led me to a lot of knowledge . . . in fact, he's led me to evahthing of value 'cept the thing I'm followin' him foah on rainy nights . . . to wheah he's buried his gold!"

There was a period of pouring, pounding rain and no words within the cottage. Then the girl demanded. "How was she, Royal? How was the white mistress when you covahed huh?"

He stared wordlessly at her, his blood burning. No Mandinga could speak of a woman in such manner as she wanted; yet if he refused, she might pull that trigger. He held his roiling thoughts and waited because it was the only thing he could do.

"I know she ain' too good," the white girl said, " 'cause Cousin Lee had to come to me a week aftah he made huh his bride! It takes a strong woman to han'le Cousin Lee, in bed or out . . . an' I'm the on'y one's bin able to han'le him, evah! He's quite a man, Cousin Lee . . . I've always thought he was the world's greatest stud . . . 'til mebbe now."

Her tawny eyes rode up and down Royal's glistening torso, centered on his breeches. "Take 'em off," she ordered, backing up the order with a jerk of the pistol.

Resignedly, Royal unfastened his breeches, let them drop, stepped out of them. Her wild, tawny eyes came to his man-part; it grew suddenly and they went wilder and now the wildness got into her throat and came out on her words, sounding somewhere between the growl and the purr of one of the great jungle cats.

"I bin wantin' to git even with Cousin Lee foah a long, long time," she growl-purred. "I bin wantin' to git even with him foah treatin' me like I'm a bitch-dog . . . or a wench. An' now I want to git even with him foah mahhyin' a Boston girl. An' gittin' even won' be hahd," she purred, "'cause I know 'zactly how I'm goin' to do it!"

CHAPTER 20

HE stared her up and down, looked her over as woman, the way a man does, not a runaway slave. She was better formed than any girl he had ever seen, white or black, with the exception of Princess. But this white girl had something Princess did not have—a wild, taunting allure, a touch of wickedness, which was the thing that made him want her.

Reason, at the back of his rising passion, told him that already he had risked his life and that of his love by taking the white mistress. But the mistress had saved Princess' life, had washed away her blood, was even now nursing Princess and would bring her to Boston, if need be. He had owed it to her when she wanted it. This white girl, this wild one who was setting him wild himself, what did she offer but danger . . . a chance to lose his short-won freedom, his very life?

"I've got a gun on you," the white girl said. "If you don' do what I wan', I kin shoot you an' kill you . . . or I kin mahch you to the mastah. An' no tellin' what he'll do to you. You rē'lize that, don' you?"

He nodded, saw her eyes seek his organ again, which now was standing at right angles to his body. "I think you wan' what I wan'," she drawled. "Now, I'm goin' lay the pistol right heah wheah I kin git my han' on it in the wink of an eye," she continued, "an' I'm goin' to step out of my dress an' let you see what's comin'. Min' now, don' make a move, 'cause I'll grab that pistol an'

shoot . . . it'll be too late foah you to explain why you moved. An' then Cousin Lee'll be bound to give me some kin' of rewahd in gold foah ketchin' his runaway slave . . . 'specially aftah I tell him how his stud an' his bride behaved!"

"I ain't going to move, Miss," Royal said.

"Lida . . . call me Lida. Anybody's goin' to be as friendly as we fixin' to be, uses fu'st names. Let me heah you say my name, Royal dahlin' . . . Lida."

"Miss Lida," repeated Royal.

"Not Miss!" cried the girl. "When a man pleasuahs me, I wan' him to call me Lida . . . Lida . . . Lida . . . now . . . practice!"

"Lida," he repeated unwillingly. "Lida."

"That's bettah." She smiled, laid the pistol on the table and, never taking her eyes off him, unbuttoned and stripped off her sodden dress. She was nude under it. Her body was even more beautiful than he had thought. Her womanhood had a wildness to it he'd not seen before, a wildness of tawny, saucy curls, a bolder, softer curve. It was a womanhood that beckoned, and he felt his heart drum.

"You like me, don' you?" she cried. "You wan' to covah me, don' you?"

He nodded.

"I won' need the pistol any moah."

"You won't need it," he said.

She slipped her hands into his and tugged him out of the room, through another room and into a third, through complete darkness. When they stopped, he felt the side of a mattress against his leg, and then she fitted herself to him, her hands crept up his chest, her fingers toyed with his nipples until they hardened, at which she moaned with wildness, and slid her arms around his neck.

"Hol' me, you wondahful big black stud," she moaned, wildness throbbing in her voice. "Put youah arms with

all that black muscle aroun' me an' cradle me, an' pull me close an' closah . . . that's it . . . now . . . put youah mouth on mine . . . kiss me . . .”

She wriggled until his swollen manhood fitted into the crease of her thigh. She pressed to him, the soft surge of her breasts inflaming him. Her lips came under his, wide and parted, her tongue thrusting into his mouth. And then she was sucking his tongue into her own mouth, hurting it with her teeth, and each small pain sent his desire wildly through him, and he slid his big hands down to cup her buttocks, lifting them, pressing her against his organ, moving in great, slow circles as they kissed and sucked.

She wrenched her mouth from his. “The bed!” she gasped. “Git on the bed!”

He flung himself on it, landing on his back, and she threw her body along the lines of his, her mouth going now to first one nipple, then the other. The feel of her nipping teeth and her busy tongue inflamed him, and he grabbed her roughly, forgetting she was white, forgetting she was anything but jungle passion, flipped her off him and slammed into the tight, hot opening under her mound with them both on their sides.

She began to buck and claw, driving her tunnel of passion up and down his shaft, and he grabbed her buttocks again and held them still while he thrust and surged. She was clawing him, growling and snarling like a she-animal, when he felt his seed burst from him and go surging into her, and as it surged and surged again and a third and fourth time, she was clawing and raking her nails along his shoulders and sobbing and growling and gurgling and purring with her own outpouring of release.

Even when they had given the tremendous final lunges, she clung to him, her mound against his still tumescent organ, and she took the lobe of his ear between her teeth and bit sharply. “Moah!” she purred. “I wan’ moah!”

"I've got more for you, Lida," he growled back, the complete jungle male, desire leaping. "I've got all you can takel"

She laughed and sobbed. "Give it to you, you black animal . . . you wondahful stud!" she cried in her purring-growl. "You'll fin' out . . . I kin take all of it an' nevah git enough! You give an' give . . . I'll take an' takel"

This time he rolled her over on her knees, arranged her so that she knelt on the bed, and entered her as a lion would go into the lioness. He pounded her with his wild need and she pounded back, laughing and exulting, and she all but lifted off the bed when she reached her peak, but he bore her down so that she was helpless and motionless under his loins, her breasts crushed against her knees as he exploded again and again.

They rolled over and lay in each other's arms, holding each other's parts. The rain was coming down harder, considerably louder. She began to talk, lacing her purring voice into the monotony of the rain.

"You the bes' man I evah did have," she said. "I don' care . . . I know it ain' right to call a nigra slave a man . . . but no mere animal kin give a woman happiness such as you have given me. Befoah, Cousin Lee was the on'y man could satisfy me, but you bettah . . . he's rough an' strong, but youah strong an' ovahpowahin' without bein' rough or huhtin'. You the fu'st black I evah had . . . the fu'st I evah wanted . . . an' I ain' givin' you up."

"There ain't any way you can keep me, Lida," he told her. "They'll be hunting me ev'rywhere soon as the rain stops."

"I'll fin' a way," she promised. "Anyhow, weah safe now . . . with Cousin Lee fixin' to feed his search pahty breakfus'. He won' be able to track with dogs long's it rains."

He told her Hunnicutt's plan to visit the underground.

"That's wondahfull" she cried. "They'll eat, an' then ride off to the undahgroun'! When they gone, then I know wheah I kin take you!"

"I can't stay in the south," Royal said. "I'm going to the north. I've got to be a free man."

"I'll he'p you," she promised. "I'll go no'th with you . . . you'll stay hid in this puhfectly safe place wheah I'll take you, an' I'll fin' out real soon wheah it is Cousin Lee buries his gold, an' I'll dig it up, one pot of it at least, an' come git you! I'll git you false papahs an' we'll be a white lady an' huh stud-slave travelin' no'th! How does that soun'?"

"It sounds real fine," Royal told her truthfully. "Only there's Princess."

"Huh!" She spat the word. "You mean to tell me I ain' bettah in bed than that mulatto wench?" she demanded.

"Youah diff'runt," he replied. "Youah a wild thing."

"What moah could any man want?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he admitted. "Only there is Princess."

"You'll fo'git huh."

The rain came pouring in a sudden, harder burst.

"How soon you be ready ag'in?" she asked, fondling him.

"I've got to get away," he replied.

"Aftah Cousin Lee an' his pahty go foah the undahgroun'," she agreed. "Then I'll take you to the hidin' place. Cousin Lee' offah a rewahd foah youah captuah . . . an' that means soon's his frien's go home, he'll have to dig up one of his pots of gold. To git the rewahd. An' it rainin' now, an' it'll be rainin' tonight, 'cause it rains a whole week like this. I'll hide neah the big house, an' when he stahts out to dig, I'll follow him an' see wheah he digs, an' then I'll git the one pot of gold, an' we kin run."

She pressed to him, moving wildly, and he groaned and took her again because she was a feral thing, she was pestering personified. As they lay resting, they heard

the dogs baying from a distance. The rain was still thundering down.

"Theah takin' the dogs to the undahgroun' in case they fin' youah spoor accidentally," Lida murmured. "Once moah . . . jus' one moah time, dahlin' . . . an' I'll git a ho'se an' we'll ride to wheah weah goin'."

Slowly, with the distant baying of the hounds as a backbeat to slow passion, Royal pushed into her now-familiar, increasingly desirable love-passage and moved within its tight grasp. She met him slow stroke for slow stroke, the titillating clasp on his organ tightening, whetting his pleasure, spurring him to greater and greater speed, until again they reached the crest, clung, fell apart.

"I don' know how I'm goin' to live without this while youah hidin' an' I'm gittin' the gold," she murmured. "Now that I've had a taste of you, I just can't do without it!"

He lay listening to her words and to the far, fading sound of the dogs. It wasn't for him to remind her again that it was time for him to get away from Hunnicutt Hill, for regardless of the intimacy they had shared he was still the slave and she the white woman. And at this moment she held all power over his future.

He considered leaping up from the bed, seizing the pistol from the kitchen, and making a run. But he would be afoot, and Lida undoubtedly would tell the master which way he had gone. She, on the other hand, had a hiding place for him, and would take him there.

He heard her draw a great, quivering sigh. "We bettah go," she said reluctantly.

As he fumbled in the dark for his sodden breeches and pulled them on, he could hear the small sounds she made as she dressed. Taking him by the hand, she led him back to the kitchen, where the lamp still burned, its light glinting the pistol on the table. She tucked the pistol into the bosom of the fresh dress she wore, and

put on a hooded cloak. She found a piece of canvas, much like the one he'd been given on the slaver only larger, and he draped it around his shoulders.

She blew out the lamp, led the way out of the house and through the rain along the very path by which he had come. He took one stride and was walking abreast of her.

"We goin' to the big house?" he whispered.

"We have to, to git a ho'se," she said, very low. "Be-foah we git to wheah any possible guard, even one with a dog, kin suspect weah theah, I know how to circle 'roun'. We'll git away . . . you'll see. I've done this befoah."

They slogged through the rain. Royal had to adjust his pace to hers. Had he been alone, he would have covered the distance in a third of the time. The rain streamed through his close-cropped wool, down his face, onto the canvas and off.

On they went, nearer and nearer to the plantation house, to Princess who lay spent from rapists' passions, from loss of the baby which might or might not have been his son. Nearer they went to danger.

Lida turned into a rain-ridden stand of timber, him at her heels. Swiftly she made her way among the trees, as easily and surely as though she'd done it many times, and he followed, trusting her because he must and because she instilled faith in him.

They climbed a pasture fence, and now he could sense the wide arc they were making across pasture land. He felt the stubble of grass under his soles, stepped once into fresh cow dung, let the stroking wet grass cleanse his foot as he walked.

Clumps of trees showed black; the bulk of the stable was a long black splotch in the raining darkness. Suddenly Lida stopped, stood very close to him. "Wait heah," she whispered. "I'll be back as fast as I kin."

He stood on the spot, under a spreading oak. The

overhanging limbs sheltered him somewhat from the rain, which splattered against the leaves, burst and sprayed, while streams of rain broke through the spaces between the leaves and poured upon his head and over him.

There was nothing but darkness and rain and waiting for Lida, nothing for Princess but weakness and loss and waiting for Royal.

After eons of raining darkness, yet sooner than he had hoped, Lida was back, riding almost soundlessly up to him on a dark and streaming horse. "Git up behin' me," she whispered. "Wink was in the stable, but he was sleepin'. I took the ho'se closest to the doah, an' a bridle . . . but we got to ride bahe-back."

Royal mounted behind her, unsure what to do with his hands. "Put youah ahms aroun' me," Lida said, kicking her heels against the horse, putting him to a walk. "An' brace youahse'f. You evah bin on a ho'se befoah?"

"No," Royal said, "never."

"When we git down the lane a piece," Lida said, still whispering, "I kin put him into a trot, an' when we git on the big road, we kin lope. Sound won' cahhy too cleah on account of the rain. We got to make a run foah it . . . we got a wet ride to New Orleans, an' I want to be back an' tuhn this ho'se into the pastuah befoah full day."

CHAPTER 21

SHE walked the horse as they entered the city of New Orleans in the predawn darkness. Rain flowed over them, veiled the occasional street light, curtained the houses on each side of the narrow, deserted streets.

"This is Basin Street," Lida said. "Even in the dahk, you can see the mansions. That one right yondah . . . see, it's three stories high. At Belle's place, wheah weah goin', theah's even a stained-glass window, an' Belle huhse'f weahs moah di'mon's than clothes. She's even got huh name spelt out in huh stained-glass front doah transom. Huh place is jus' at the nex' cohnah."

Royal sat mute, rain clothing him, absorbing into his mind the wonders the white girl was relating. They neared the corner, and Lida reined the horse up at a pair of tall iron lace-work gates.

"Should I open them?" Royal asked.

"Theyah locked . . . theah's a cohtyahd with iron fuhnituah all painted white," Lida said. "Cousin Lee's tol' me. Theah's a bell . . . I'll jus' pull the chain. They'll come see who 'tis, an' what we want. We've reached ouah destination."

She leaned forward and tugged a chain, and the clear, loud tones of a set of bells lifted above the chattering rain. They waited in the downpour, and Lida tugged at the bell chain again and still again.

At last a husky male voice called, "Who there . . . an' what you want?"

"Lida Hunnicutt," replied the girl. "I want to see Belle."

"We closed fo' the night."

"You jus' tell Miss Belle. Use the name Hunnicutt. She'll let us in."

The husky voice left. Raining silence filled the earth again. The voice returned. There was a lantern, too.

"Miss Belle say come in," it said. There was a rattle of a lock, the gates swung inward, and Lida kicked the horse's flanks and he walked through.

The voice belonged to a brawny old Negro with white wool showing from under the coat he was holding over his head. "I take you to the side do'," he said, "then stable the ho'se, Miss Hunnicutt."

They dismounted and ran for the house. A tall, lush woman of thirty-five, dressed in a green peignoir, her long, pale red hair flowing to below her waist, met them at the door. Clear white stones flashed in her ears and on her fingers, and Royal knew they were the diamonds Lida had mentioned.

She led them to a big, square room furnished in brilliant red and gold. There was a huge crystal chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling; big, antimacassared chairs were set at inviting angles. Beside each chair was a marble-topped table littered with used glasses and crystal bowls which were filled with cigar butts and matches.

"Excuse the looks of the place," Belle said carelessly. "When the gentlemen left, I told Martin—he opened the gates—to let everything go. The back parlor might be neater, but I doubt it." She swung gracefully about, leaned one arm along the top of the pianoforte and looked at them, pale eyes bright and intelligent. "The girls, of course, are all asleep," she said.

"That don' make no nevah-min'," Lida said. "I'm Lida Hunnicutt . . . Lee Hunnicutt's cousin. You are Belle, ain' you?"

Royal watched the red-haired woman look the tawny-haired plantation girl over. Her eyes were calculating and they were very pale—maybe gray, if they could be said to have any color at all. Her features were fine, almost sharp, and she had red dew on cheeks and lips.

"I'm Belle," she replied at last. "What can I do for you?"

"I got this stud foah lease," Lida said baldly. She gestured to Royal. "Drop that canvas . . . let Miss Belle see you."

He removed the canvas and stood holding it.

Now, for the first time, the painted woman looked at him. Her eyes came alive and raced over him—head, face, torso. "Take off the breeches," she said, and he obeyed and stood with her attention on his man-part which grew to half-tumescence under the suddenly burning message of her eyes.

"Why me?" Belle asked, watching that tumescence. "Why did you bring him to me? Does your cousin know you're here?"

"I brought him 'cause I need the money," Lida said. "I cahhied him to you, because my cousin Lee has spoken of you. He's tol' me 'bout youah spohtin' house, that it's the best in New Orleans. He's mentioned that you tol' him you could make a lot of money if you could git you a good bed-boy—that theah's white women'll pay high foah the suhvices of such a stud-boy. I guarantee that Royal's the bes' stud to be foun' . . . my puhsonal guarantee. An' no, my cousin don't know I'm heah, an' he ain' to know. He ain' to know you leased this stud . . . that's paht of the deal. Royal's to be a complete secret f'um all' cept the ladies he 'commodates."

"He's a runaway," the sporting woman said. "He belongs to Lee Hunnicutt."

"He's my puhsonal prop'ty," Lida said coolly.

"But I'm still not to tell Mr. Hunnicutt," the madam said crisply.

"You don' make a practice of tellin' my cousin youah business, do you?" countered Lida.

A smile twitched Belle's lips, vanished. "I don't make a practice of taking him to my boudoir, either," she said. "Only on special—and expensive—" she touched the stone in one of her ears. "occasions."

"I've wondahed."

"My girls are quite able to entertain Mr. Hunnicutt—and all my customers," the madam said. "As to this stud," she continued, "I'll give you twenty-five a week."

"I want twenty-five a night," Lida replied. "You kin cha'ge twenty-five dollahs a woman, an' he kin take care of five or even six women evah night."

The pale eyes bored at the tawny girl. "Ten a night, since I must keep him hidden and put myself in the position of harboring a slave with a price on him. Lee Hunnicutt will never accept this loss. He'll not give up—he'll go to any lengths."

"Ten a night—if you give him a week's pay right now," Lida agreed. "In gold."

"You're leasing him out and letting him collect the payment? I like to understand everything when I make a deal. I don't understand this. A moment ago you said you want to lease him because you need the money."

"Lee tol' me youah a smaht business woman!" Lida cried, "An' you are! I need the money, but foah Royal himse'f. I'm lettin' him buy his freedom by bein' bed-boy, foah you."

Belle's lips tightened. "I want a guarantee as to the length of his service," she said. "Six months, with option to extend. That's more than eighteen hundred dollars for the six months, but not enough to buy his freedom. He's worth thousands."

"Six months an' no option," Lida replied, "provided you keep him secret an' hid f'um any nosin' aroun' on the paht of youah girls an' my cousin . . . even police."

"I accept," Belle said. "You want to see me pay him seventy dollars in gold before you leave, if I understand you."

"That's it. When Royal gits the gold, then you an' me has got a deal."

"I'll bring it," said Belle, and went with long-legged, gliding grace from the room.

Royal stared at Lida. He didn't want to hide in a brothel, didn't want to cover white women who yearned for hard black male flesh.

"I know what you thinkin'," Lida whispered. "It won' be six months . . . it may not even be six days . . . jus' long enough foah me to fin' one of them pots of gold! Maybe that'll even be tomorrow night . . . an' I'll come right back foah you. You'll like that, won' you?"

"Yes," he agreed, "only . . ."

"Don' give that six months talk a thought," Lida urged. "Think I wan' you in bed with one white bitch aftah anothah? I tol' huh six months foah youah safety . . . nothin' else . . . so she'll keep you hid! You to stay heah, undahstan' . . . an' if it takes a week or even a month . . . keep hid . . . save that gold. We'll git away . . . I promis!"

She cut off, finger to her lips. When Belle reentered, the gold pieces in the palm of her hand, Lida was ordering Royal to get back into his breeches.

After Lida was gone, Belle felt Royal's arms and chest over. "Make muscles," she said, and he did and felt the tremor that went through her. Finally she turned gracefully toward the door. "Follow me," she said. "No one knows you're here . . . Martin understands, has seen nothing, will admit nothing. We're going to the third floor."

Royal followed, keeping three steps behind her as they climbed the wide, curving stairway. On the third floor, she led to a room at the front, opened the door and

beckoned him to enter, and he did, finding himself in a great room which extended across the entire front of the house.

She locked the door. "This is my boudoir," she told him. "There are bars at all the windows . . . at every window in the house. Look around carefully and tell me what you think of my taste. I want the truth, for through the truth I will know you."

He had never seen so vast a room. There were four windows across the front and two on each side. The color of the room was green—a jewel tone in the carpet, pale green on the walls, a softly vivid green at the windows, draped across them in folds and swaths and great bows. The same green covered the wide bed, which had four great gleaming posts of reddish mahogany. A vast gilt mirror was set into the ceiling above the bed, repeating the bed in itself. The chairs, dresser and armoire were of mahogany, the tables marble-topped. There were so many lamps, bowls, vases, figurines and knicknacks around that Royal could hardly single out any one item.

"Well?" the madam asked.

"It is fine and rich," Royal said. "I did not know such a room existed."

"But you don't like it?"

"I am used to the middle plateau . . . to the jungle. I cannot say I do not like it, but that I am not used to it."

"You'll get used to it," she told him. "You'll spend a big part of the next six months in it. That's a three inch door which will be locked and like I told you, the windows are barred. It wouldn't be much use to try to escape."

"No, Madam."

"You'll service ladies in this room . . . if I don't keep you for my own exclusive fancy-man."

Suddenly all he could think of was Princess, whose want for him was clean and pure and natural and lovely

and right. Just to think of her washed him clean, for an instant, of the pulsing, passionate, unholy lust which betrayed Lida and this red-haired woman and all the other women who set eyes on him.

"And here," the sporting woman said, moving aside a wall drape, "is where you'll stay when you're not in my boudoir . . . locked behind a second three-inch door. Come."

Obediently he crossed the room. She opened the sturdy door, which gave onto a short, almost ladderlike flight of steps.

"Your room," she told him, "that only Martin knows about. Your bed is directly over my bed. I'll have Martin bring you water so you can wash off the rain. Later . . . maybe tonight . . . just maybe . . . I'll let you come back to me."

CHAPTER 22

HUNNICUTT and his search party turned away from the decrepit country house which had proved to be no underground depot at all. If ever it had served that purpose, it no longer did, since its only inhabitants were spiders and rats. They had gone in, had tramped the empty rooms upstairs and down, and found nothing, not so much as a broken chair.

The party of seven, Hunnicutt, the overseer and five neighbors, talked about riding on to New Orleans. This was the suggestion of Arthur Stone of Axmore Plantation.

"In this rain an' all," Stone said, as they all stood in the deserted parlor of the deserted house before slogging out to their rain-soaked horses, "them dogs ain' goin' to do no good until goodness knows when! Seein's weah not fah f'um New Orleans now, why'nt we ride in an' repoht you got a slave at lahge, Lee?"

"That's a hell of a good ideel" put in Harold Vannice, the white-haired master of Rivercane, south of Hunnicutt Hill. "You was sayin' you goin' to post a rewahd . . . soonah you tell the authorities, soonah you git evahbody all ovah the countryside to watchin' foah youah runaway."

Lee frowned, his instinct being to hunt the black down personally and see to it that he was suitably punished. But he couldn't go against the advice of his peers, all but one of whom were considerably older than himself and who, as a group, expected him to defer to them on some points.

He glanced at Stone, who was in his forties, and at the Larkin twins, Lester and Luther, joint owners of Black Gate Plantation, who were almost forty. Even young Billy Owens, who had just turned twenty-one and inherited his grandfather's sugar cane plantation known as Owens' Place, was nodding approval.

"I think so, suh," he said to Hunnicutt. "Then we kin ride the swamps with the houn's."

"I reckon you right, my frien's," Lee told them. "I'm so all-fiahed mad at that niggah I'd like to take the hide right off him with a blacksnake! But this is sensible. He's liable to try to smuggle hisse'f aboahd a steamah an' make foah the no'th. We'll go on into New Orleans an' 'tend to the bus'ness in han', then I'll ask you all to do me the honah of bein' my guests foah noon dinnah at the St. Louis Hotel, wheah we kin dry out."

The men accepted with a good deal of joking and laughing. Hunnicutt told Slocum to take the dogs home, instructing him to rub them dry and feed them and keep them ready to hit the trail as soon as the rain stopped. Then he and his friends ducked their heads against the rain and ran to their bedraggled horses, mounted and loped toward the city.

The rain continued throughout dinner in the sparsely filled hotel dining room. The party ate heartily and drank even more heartily. They told of other slave hunts. Each man had his family story of how a slave was run to earth and what punishment was meted out to him or what disposition was made of him. They agreed that for a slave to run was almost the worst thing a slave could do to a kind and loving and long-suffering master.

"Thankless," said the sixty-year-old Vannice. "Plumb thankless, that's the nigra." And they drank to that.

By midafternoon the party decided to return home. The rain was still falling, harder than before, if anything.

"Soon's it lets up," said one of the Larkin twins, "we

kin all assemble at Hunnicutt Hill ag'in, give the dogs the scent, an' staht trackin'."

"Fine, fine," said Vannice, and all the others began to nod.

"If it wasn' foah seein' the rest of you ride off home without me," Hunnicutt remarked, "I'd jus' stay on an houah or so . . . see to havin' some real big postahs made up . . . not jus' them little things the police officials puts out."

"You stay, Lee . . . you stay," responded Stone. "You the one that's goin' to be faulted. We got each othah foah comp'ny, an' you'll have to ride alone—unless somebody stays behin'."

"I wouldn' think of that!" protested Hunnicutt. "I've put you all out a'ready, an' I'm fixin' to put you out moah! You'll do me a favah if you ride on home an' leave me come at my leisuah, with nobody stayin' behin' to keep me comp'ny."

And so, after much sollicitious argument on both sides of the question, and a number of drinks to assure one and all that everything was friendly, it was decided. The search party, except for Lee, would now return home. He would finish his business in New Orleans and depart whenever he saw fit and it was convenient.

After they were gone, and when he had spent some hours ordering the posters he wanted, Hunnicutt discovered it was time for supper. This he ate in the St. Louis Hotel dining room, sitting beside a window beyond which the rain sheeted ceaselessly down. There were fewer guests for supper than there had been for dinner.

It was ten o'clock when he finished a dish of lemon pudding and drank a cup of black coffee. It was still maybe a mite early to go to Belle's, but he needed to go there and tonight he aimed to have the personal attention of the madam herself.

Even if it cost him a pair of emerald earrings.

CHAPTER 23

NAKED, Royal silently paced his attic room. Five strides brought him to the far wall. A turn and five strides returned him to his starting point. Over and over, making never a sound, not so much as the creak of the floor boards beneath the thick red carpeting. Past the comfortable bed, the big lounging chair, past the armoire where he kept his gold—seventy dollars from Belle, five dollars from Frances Hunnicutt—past the small table with a chair drawn to it.

He was naked because Belle had commanded Martin to take away his sodden breeches and he had nothing else. Martin had measured him—chest, waist, hips, arms, length. Even his feet.

"You a lucky niggah," Martin had said, writing down Royal's measurement, bending his white-cotton head over the paper. "Miss Belle gittin' you some fine clo'es made . . . an' real boots to fit them big feet. I lucky niggah too, to b'long to Miss Belle. She bought me pah'tly 'cause I kin read an' write an' figuah . . . she use me that way all time. She gittin' you a fine robe made, an' suits an' shirts. The robe to be delivahed fu'st."

"Miss Belle owns this house, I reckon," Royal ventured, wanting to find out what actually went on here, but avoiding direct questions.

"She rent it by the yeah," Martin replied. "It a spohtin' house." He cocked his white head to one side and regarded Royal. "You know what a spohtin' house is?"

"I reckon not. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me."

"It a house a gent'man kin come to," explained the old butler, "when he seekin' re-laxation an' the comp'ny of beautiful an' frien'ly ladies. Miss Belle keeps eight lovely girls heah. Evah night they dress in silk an' satin an' they goes down to the pahlahs an' greet the gent'men callahs an' have drinks with them—Miss Belle serves on'y the finest liquah, an' at the highest prices. An' they talk to the callahs an' listen to the five-piece orchestra Miss Belle provides. When a gent'man gits his fill of music an' champagne an' convahsation, he picks out a girl an' she takes him to huh room upstairs. Once they git in that room, he kin pestah huh foah an houah—or all night long an' git his breakfus' an' his shirt washed an' ironed an' waitin' an' his boots polished—dependin' on whichevah he's paid Miss Belle foah. A gent'man wants to spen' the entiah night, it cost him a hundred dollahs. Miss Belle's the highest priced an' the bes' spohtin' house in New Orleans."

Royal had stood, silent, considering all Martin had told him. The old butler had regarded him soberly, then had begun to smile.

"You eat that grub on the tray I brung," he advised. "Once Miss Belle gits free tonight, she likely expec' you to come to huh boudoir. Miss Belle don' entahtain gent'men as a rule—when she do, it an occasion, an' she gits a valu'ble gif' . . . di'mon's or a pianoforte or a crystal chandelier fum Paris. It strictly business with huh."

Royal had eaten the food, had stretched on the bed and slept, the rain on the roof so near it put a ceiling of noise above him. Now it was dark outside and still raining. He had long since lighted the lamp on his table and begun to pace, waiting for what came next. Once he went down the steps and tried the door. It was locked.

Now, making a turn for his pacing, he heard the bou-

door close. He froze in position, listening deeply. At first there was nothing, then he heard an all too well remembered voice, that of Lee Hunnicutt, speaking loudly and in a petulant tone.

"I vow, Belle," Hunnicutt was complaining, "you are the mos' aggravatin', grasper' female alive! Emerald earrings! Don' you nevah think of anythin' 'cept what you kin git—di'mon's, emeralds, that new dinin' room fuhni-tuhe . . . all out of my pocket!"

"Certainly I think of what I can get!" Royal heard Belle retort. "I think of it all the time! If you want a girl to go to bed with, an hour for twenty-five dollars, just say so. Vi's still free . . . I can fix you up with her if you make up your mind soon enough. If not, you may have to wait."

"I don' wan' Vi . . . or none of the othahs," Hunnicutt snapped. "I got the best comin' tonight . . . emeralds or no emeralds! But youah makin' me double my rewahd . . . an' you know it!"

"You're wrong in the head!" Belle cried. "What have I got to do with the reward you're offering for that run-away buck?"

"Five thousan' dollahs cash rewahd foah him," Hunnicutt said angrily, "an' because I simply got to git rid of my steam ovah him, I need youah services an' you hol' me up foah a pair of five thousan' dollah emerald earrings! If that ain' doublin' the rewahd, what is? An' if theah's anythin' I hate, it's throwin' money aroun', as you well know!"

"Either I'm worth the earrings or I'm not," Belle said shortly. "In about two minutes I'm going to decide to hell with the earrings."

"I reckon you would!" Hunnicutt yelled angrily. "Git them clo'es off an' I'll throw you on that bed undah that lookin' glass an' you kin see foah youahsef how a real man puhfohms with a real whoah!"

"Close the window drapes," Belle ordered in her turn.

"Git youah butlah to do niggah's wu'hk," retorted Hunnicutt.

"He's slow, Lee. If you do it, we'll save time. We'll be on the bed sooner."

"Hell an' damnation!" he yelled. "You jus' makin' me maddah! Time I git them drapes closed an' git my clo'es off, I'll be so hohny I'll plow you through the bed!"

"That's what you like," taunted Belle. "You love to be driven crazy—then you have a better time!"

Suddenly Royal could hear their voices more clearly, could hear the soft, silken sound of the closing drapes, could see light at the foot of the steps. His heart began to pound. Belle had opened the little door to the stairway! There was now only the wall drapery to shield his hiding place from the master!

She liked to play with fire, this white whore.

She wanted the slave, her new fancy-boy, to hear her sporting with his white master. She wanted the master to debase himself before his hunted slave. She was wild, this madame, wilder than Lida, wilder than the feral things in the jungle.

He crouched naked on the top step. He heard the panting and cursing of the master as he rid himself of his garments. He heard the silken rip as he tore away the madame's dress, her undergarments.

"That'll cost you another three hundred dollars, Lee," the madame said. "I value my wardrobe."

"Let it cost an' be damned!" yelled Hunnicutt. "I'm aftah my money's worth, you whoah!"

Royal heard the bed give as the master threw the madam upon it, heard it give as he leapt upon her. There was instant cursing, panting, grunting, groaning. There was the pounding of bodies and over all the smell of lust, on and on. All through the night it continued, assault after assault, cursing climax after cursing climax, and all through the night Royal crouched on the step

and listened to the master and the whore-madam, listened to the rain pouring. And he burned and ached with his own need for a woman, for that whore-woman who was tireless and insatiable.

Unbelievably, after eternities, there were sounds of departure.

"Well," Belle asked distinctly, "did you get your money's worth?"

"Any time I don', I'll be dead," Hunnicutt growled.

"That's the emerald earrings Mr. Smothers is holding for me in his shop," said Belle, "and three hundred gold dollars for my ruined clothes. By special messenger . . . within the hour."

"It'll take a couple of houahs, an' you know it," Hunnicutt growled, "with this damned, endless rain!"

"You're organizing the search as soon as the rain stops?"

"The split second!" said Hunnicutt emphatically. "An' the police'll be watchin' steamboats an' ocean-goin' vessels. He won' git away, that's foah suah!"

Belle seemingly followed him into the hall, for their voices faded. Then the door of the boudoir closed, the key turned in the lock, and she began to move about the room. Eventually she swept aside the drapery and stood in warm lamplight and looked up at Royal who was still, of necessity, naked.

She was naked, too. Her tall figure was lush, yet firm. Her skin was white as milk, that light red hair hanging over her big, high breasts and falling to touch the matching triangle at the center of her curving thighs.

"Come down here, fancy-man," she said huskily. "I'm dying to give you a taste of what you've listened to all night! Get that tool ready . . . it's what I leased you for. And while that brute of a master of yours is crawling through the swamps trying to find you, you'll be using that tool on a woman the way it was meant to be used. Hurry, fancy-man—I've waited all night! Having him

here with you, his runaway slave listening, whetted me to where I can't stand it!"

She stood before him, her nakedness giving off an exotic scent, as if she had just bathed and rubbed herself with aromatic leaves, not as if she had wallowed under the rutting master for hours on end. She looked refreshed. Even the bed was immaculate, made up with fresh sheets.

She stood waiting, a lusting female thing.

Instinctively he swelled; she saw it at once.

"Pick me up!" she ordered throatily.

He lifted her and carried her to the bed. This was what she wanted, what he must do. At the moment it was what he wanted, too. It was what he had wanted all night.

She opened herself and he plunged eagerly in. She moved in a wide, round motion, moved gracefully; in wonder he followed her lead, matched her motion, found it a delight. Faster, in their circular movement, faster yet. Faster her exotic breath hitting his parted lips; faster her breath hitting his cheek. Faster the mahogany brown hips, faster the milky white. Faster the growing tip of manhood, tighter the tip, exploding, the tip—hot and exploding and a groaning, crying delight. Her cries came into his cries and even in the midst of their release the hips, the now slow hips, brown and white hips intermingled, kept moving, slowly, luxuriously . . . almost stopping, then speeding fast and faster for the next explosion and beyond that still another.

At the end, when she lay replete in his arms, her fingers resting on him, loathe not to touch, to hold, to possess, she whispered, "My fancy-man . . . my bed-boy . . . my very own! You'll service just one customer a night . . . just once, never twice . . . and she will pay one hundred dollars! But the other two . . . or three . . . or four services left in you every night are mine . . . and mine alone!"

CHAPTER 24

WITH the exception of a royal blue watered silk robe, Royal's newly tailored clothes and his boots were not delivered for more than a week. He spent the time in the boudoir with Belle except for the hours she was downstairs at night, greeting customers and collecting money, which time he spent locked in his attic room, sleeping.

Martin served their meals in the boudoir. The door was kept locked at all times. When Royal and Belle weren't eating or talking, they were on the bed sporting. She taught him to watch in the overhead mirror but, though she became wildly excited over their reflection and seemed to attain a richer reward, he never could get interested in it. He found the many new ways of making love which she was constantly teaching him far more stimulating and satisfying than the mirror.

"This is our honeymoon," she told him the second day as they were drinking coffee after their noon-time breakfast. "This whole week before I let you service any of the hags. Martin has dropped hints at the public market, and already I've had inquiries, oh very discreet, but these discreet ladies are ready to buy what you can give them, my bed-boy!"

"I understand how the gentlemen come to the front door and you greet them," Royal said. "Is it permitted that I know how the ladies can come here—discreetly?"

"There's a small back gate to the courtyard," Belle

explained. "And a back stairway they can reach by way of a small corridor which serves both kitchen and stair. Martin will see that they get in and out and are not seen even by Hettie—that's my cook. The stair comes to this floor."

Royal gazed at her. She was nude under her gray-green peignoir, which gaped open showing most of one breast. As always, when they were together, she wore her hair loose, and a strand of it now lay on the exposed breast, rising and falling with her breathing. She was almost beautiful, but more than that she had great intelligence. She had intelligence enough to be a queen, back on the middle plateau. He wondered what her reaction would be if he were to tell her this.

"I suppose you'd like to know about my establishment," she said, "about Belle's Pleasure Palace."

"Yes, Madam," he agreed. "If you care to tell."

She lifted one shoulder. "Why not? It's my work, and it pays, it really pays. There's a saying on Basin Street that goes: 'All women are sitting on a fortune, if they'd only realize it.' Well, I realized it, and I traded on it and eventually got a regular customer of mine, a city councilman, to set me up. By the time I was making a profit, his wife found out. So now I'm beholden to no one. I came here from St. Louis where I spent eight years in a well-run establishment. I'd kept my eyes open and learned more than how to do tricks in bed."

"St. Louis," Royal repeated, "that's uprivah."

"It can't hold a candle to New Orleans," Belle said. "I furnished this house with a lot of care for the customers' comforts, habits, and little tricks. I put in a lot of Venice glass and drapes of red velvet to the floor, and I hand-picked eight girls—one from as far as San Francisco and one even from Havana. They're called Lucy Ann and Conchita. And two high yellows I bill as Spanish and gave Spanish names to—Dolores

and Maria. Then there's Marge and Esther from Alabama and little Helen from Florida and the one I sent for from St. Louis—that's Vi, and she has to be watched because she snoops and tattles, but she's handy with certain offbeat Johns."

"Is it permitted that I ask questions, Madam?"

"Ask away," Belle said. "I love to talk about my house—it's my life work."

"The girls live right here?"

"Twenty-four hours a day. Mornings the house is like a tomb. The girls are sleeping and Martin hoses down the plant boxes and banquettes, and the shutters are up. Inside, Hettie and the three house wenches clean up the cigar trays and sweep and dust and rub out wet glass stains and sort out the linen. There isn't any use making any dinner, because it isn't until two o'clock that some of the girls yell down to the maids to shake their black ass and bring up coffee. The girls are weak-stomached until the coffee comes. When I have a lush I have to watch she doesn't get any liquor."

"Do they eat in their rooms?" Royal asked.

"No. I insist they be down at four o'clock for supper. And I make them bathe. I insist on a bath every day. You'd be surprised how some of them try to get out of it. And I make them do their hair before they come down, and wear clean robes or peignoirs. I see they get a good meal—a gumbo, steak, potatoes, turkey, river catfish, apple pie, and lots of stewed fruit."

"Do the girls ever go out?" Royal asked, interested.

"I don't let them out much, but each gets a day off," Belle said. "The Catholic whores are usually pious and go to Mass. When they're here, which is most of the time, they sit and smoke and talk some until nine in the evening. They do their hair over, look at some magazines. At nine o'clock the five darkies I hire start the music in the back parlor and the girls go up to put on their evening dresses. Sometimes a stray customer

comes in at ten and asks for a girl. By midnight, we have a dozen to twenty Joes in both parlors, the girls circulating and the maids passing out drinks."

"Do the gentlemen pay the girls?" Royal asked.

"They pay me, and I pay the girls one-third of what they earn," Belle explained. "I never hold back, and I don't shark them with interest on loans when they borrow. They get their money and do what they want, though I do warn them not to spend on fancy-men. They're charged for meals, linen, and room, and if they're not fall-down drunks, I throw in the liquor free."

"How can a girl drink with the men all evening and not get drunk?"

"They get cold tea in their drinks," she said, "but every fifth round I give them a belt of rye. Usually by two in the morning, the rooms are all occupied and I'm drinking with the waiting customers. The girls sort of slide downstairs again, with their faces fixed and hair combed. By three the crowd business is petering off. And the all-night tricks, the Johns who stay the night are tucked away . . . and that's when I come to you," she finished.

She stood up from the table, dropped her robe and waited. He threw aside his robe and with one easy stride swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. "My fancy-boy," she crooned. "You've got the highest-priced whore in town, you know that? And the smartest madam in the business all for your own! What do you think about that . . . let me feel what you think!"

He bore into her, oblivious to anything but sensation.

CHAPTER 25

THE female customers flowed to the boudoir, a different one each night, and only one. They came in dark, ankle-length dresses and were heavily veiled.

"They dress like widows," Belle laughed to Royal after the first week. "Some of them are widows, and they really need your services. Some are wives, but their husbands either patronize one of the sporting houses or keep a *placée* down by the ramparts, so they need your services, too. You should hear them beg for extra time, but I've already got your calendar filled. Thirty women have asked for you, and there's only thirty nights in a month. So they'll just have to wait their turn. You're going to make me rich, Royal, besides giving me the time of my life!"

The first woman he serviced was very large. She waddled breathlessly into the boudoir, glancing back as though she was being followed. But only Martin was in the hall, courteous and bowing as he closed the door, locking her in with the stud for hire.

Royal stood before the fireplace, wearing his blue robe. She stopped inside the door, a squat, square block in black with heavily veiled face. She could see through the veil, for after a moment she said, in a throbbing voice, "Take it off."

He untied the belt of the robe, opened it at the front, slid it off his arms, dropped it on the chair in which he had been sitting before she entered. He could feel

her eyes boring hotly through that veil, could feel them all over him, knew when they centered on his man-part. It protruded from its strong roots in his sexual wool, massively at rest above his great, firm testicles. It was larger even now, when not the least tumescent, than the organ of any other man, white or black, she had ever seen.

She sucked in her breath. "Belle didn't lie!" she ejaculated. "If youah like that now, befoah we even— If you live up to youah promise which I kin see you will with my own eyes, you'll be *wu'th* a hundred dol-lahs!"

"Yes, ma'am," Royal said, because response was expected, because Belle had given him certain instructions. "Would Madam like assistance in removing her veil?" he asked. "And her cloak?"

"No," she replied, "Madam will have moah pleasuah in lookin' at you while she removes huh own veil an' cloak, an' the rest. Madam hopes to see that membah she's heah to enjoy staht its preliminary puhfohmance while she disrobes."

Abruptly Royal felt degraded, trapped. It had been a degradation on the plantation to be ordered to cover this wench and that wench. He had enjoyed the act itself well enough once he was into it, but to have no free choice, to be ordered to pour his seed into nubile wenches, was a violation of his person and his integrity as king, as man.

But now, to be compelled to service this fat white woman, and endless others like her, women no longer nubile, who were even repulsive, was the ultimate degradation. Yet, he thought suddenly, it differed from the plantation, and to his benefit. Here it was temporary, here he would accumulate gold to take both himself and Princess to the north, aside from any further help from Lida.

He watched the white woman lift her veil, sweep off

her hat. Her hair was dirty-gray and drawn straight back to a knot. Her face was fat and her chin hung in dewlaps. Her eyes were small and bright and brown, her nose tiny, her mouth large and avid. Her skin was white and fair. She was fully fifty, a grandmother perhaps, certainly old enough to be a great-grandmother.

With her little eyes bright on him, she took off her cloak and threw it aside. Her black dress buttoned down the front to the waist, and her dimpled white hands, studded with flashing diamonds, speedily unfastened these and she struggled out of the dress. Next she fought free of two long, embroidered petticoats, corset, chemise and drawers.

Her body was a sea of flesh. The vast abdomen bilged like some great ocean breaker. The breasts rose up and out, great heavy mounds with very little droop and with enormous, hair-encircled nipples. The hips bore camel humps of fat; the buttocks were vast beyond belief. The thighs were far bigger than Royal's, with ripples of fat that finally ended in an overhang, a flesh-fall to the lower legs, which were revealed to be fat and utterly shapeless when she took off her black slippers and black lisle stockings.

"This is ready," she said hoarsely, laying one diamond-flashing hand on the fatty mound where the growth was dirty-gray and wiry. "I'm ready, but you ain't. Well, I'll git you ready . . . git on the bed, boy."

As a shoemaker in Boston, Royal thought as he went to the bed, I can earn money for our fares to Africa. He didn't know what names white men used for the seaports of Africa, but just let him and Princess be set ashore anywhere on the central coast, and they could make their way to the middle plateau.

He stretched out on his back. The woman came ponderously onto the bed, her weight making the mattress creak. "Stretch out youah ahm," she said, "so's I kin lay my head on it," and he complied. Her hair was

wiry against his skin, and her overflowing breasts and massive belly pressed against his side.

She moved her hand across his chest, back and forth. In the mirror overhead he watched her diamonds twinkle along his mahogany skin. He rigidly kept his eyes away from the blasphemous abundance of her flesh, followed only the sparkling diamonds. They glinted down his hard, indrawn belly, down one thigh, up the other. They twinkled along his testicles, tickling, and he felt the first unwilling stir in his depths. Again they twinkled and tickled, and again, and at just the right instant they encircled his organ so that, within their sparkling belt, he swelled. Now the diamonds winked and glittered as the gentle pressure embraced, relaxed, embraced, kept a winking rhythm which set him swelling and reaching for more . . . for all . . . in spite of everything, in spite of what he wanted or what he did not want.

"Now," she said, her breath big and hot in his face, "put it in—hurry! I can't wait no longah—what you think I am?"

He lifted himself, swung into place and aimed at the pulsing center. She was big inside, but the size of his organ made up for the looseness it encountered, and the lunging ferociousness with which she hoisted her hips, hurling them at him, time after time, with surprising dexterity and speed, provided his pumping tool with all the friction he needed.

"Oooh . . . oooh!" she squealed, like a young girl, totally unlike the old, fat woman she was. "Oooh . . . oooh!" she squealed again, her flesh climbing him, her inner parts consuming him. "Oooh . . . dah-lin' . . . hol' back . . . don' let it come . . . I'm gittin' theah . . . if you jus' hol' back . . . oooh . . . now . . . now . . . don' stop . . ." she pleaded. "Don' let up . . . now . . . theah I go . . . oooh . . . oooh . . . don' stop . . . ag'in . . . go at it ag'in . . . you ain' spent . . .

I kin' git anothah time, dahlin' . . . oooh . . . give me anothah ti. . .ime!"

Reaching his limit, he felt himself swell to bursting, and he kept pumping, every heavy lunge of her seas of fat the last he could endure, but somehow he did endure until she squealed again, squealed and squealed. And then, at last, he let his man-passion empty itself and rolled away from her.

She was panting and heaving and weeping, her bediamonded hands clasped over one great breast. Her tears were running down her face.

"Once moah!" she gasped. "Please—one moah time!"

"Miss Belle won't allow it," he told her, sorry for her. He wondered how many months—or years—it had been since a man had pleased her. He wondered how many more women like her existed, women who hungered for man, and could not get him unless they paid.

She pushed heavily up from the bed, her eyes wandering his body. "Youah unbelievable," she said. "Youah wu'th a hundred dollahs. I'll give you anothah hundred if you'll oblige me ag'in."

"I'm sorry, Madam."

"Don' call me 'Madam.' Call me Clara. Who'd know if you did? I'll give you the hundred secretly."

"It ain't allowed. Miss Belle would know."

"On'y if you had othah customahs, an' then on'y if you couldn' puhfohm. An' Belle tol' me she's hirin' you out on'y once a night." The bright little eyes narrowed. "On'y way she'd know is you couldn' puhfohm foah Belle huhse'f as many times as she wants. That's it, ain't it? Belle's got huhse'f a fancy-man, an' she hiahs him out to one customah a night!"

Royal sat wordless on the bed.

Clara sat beside him, naked and unashamed. "Did Belle buy you?" she demanded. "You huh chattel?"

"I ain't allowed to discuss business," he told her.

"She tol' me she's leasin' you," Clara said. "An' I'm inclined to b'lieve huh. She's got a reputation foah bein' honest, but a woman to drive a hahd bahgain. How much does she pay you?"

Royal remained silent.

"Whatevah it is, it ain' enough. I got a proposition. Will you listen to it?"

"I'm undah obligation to Miss Belle," Royal replied, wanting no proposition from this woman, wanting never to service her again. Now, regarding her rolls of flesh, he was repulsed that he could have put his body into hers.

"I undahstan' that, but whatevah youah obligation is," Clara insisted, "I'll buy huh off. No mattah what stoah she sets by you, she ain' going' to lightly tuh'n down a soun', high-priced offah. An' when I make that offah an' she accepts it . . ." She broke off suddenly. "What's youah name, Boy?"

"Boy," he replied as Belle had instructed him.

"Likely!" she snorted. "Well, know what I'm goin' to do with you, Boy? I got a very rich husban' that can' see nothin' but his quadroon he keeps down by the rampahts in a little house. He's had huh foah yeahs, an' foah all those yeahs I've bin sittin' in ouah fine house on Royal Street, an' I ain' had the fu'st *drop* of affection an' attention until heah in this room tonight!"

"Madam," Royal said sincerely, "I'm sorry."

"Clara. Call me Clara."

"Clara," he said, "I'm sorry."

"Not on'y is my husban' very rich," she went on, "but I am richah than he is, in my own right f'm my fathah. We nevah had chil'run, though he's got a passel of 'em by the quadroon. Now I'm goin' to rent a house down by the rampahts an' I'm goin' to put you in it. You goin' to be my lovah all the res' of my life, an' whatevah it is that Belle's a-payin' you, I'll triple an' when I die you'll have the house an' money lef' to live

an' travel 'til you die youahse'fl Now, ain' that a good proposition?" She sat back in her rolls of nakedness and waited for his reply.

"It's a generous offer, Clara," he said softly. His aversion for her drained away, and he felt pity take its place. He was sorry that this hungry woman, lost in years, lost in obesity, lost from love, from husband, could not have the modest comfort she sought at such price.

"Then you'll do it . . . you accept?"

He shook his head. "I can't. Not even if Miss Belle—I can't."

Her diamonds were clutching him. "Why not? I'll pay anything, give anything . . . !"

A discreet rapping came at the door. "Madam," called Martin. "Miss Belle sent me. Time's up, Madam . . . should I have one of the wenches come help you, Madam?"

"No," groaned Clara. "No!" she half-screamed. "I'll he'p myse'fl" She got off the bed and in silence tugged herself into her clothes. Veiled, she faced Royal. "We'll talk about this in a month," she said. "That's when Belle's given me my next appointment—a month f'um tonight. God . . . how kin I evah wait a month? An' if I make a deal with Belle, you'll do as I say . . . you ain' but a nigra, an' you'll have tol"

The rapping came at the door again, fully as discreet.

She went to it, and when Martin swung it open, went out.

Royal heard Martin lock the door, turned and went up the steps to his own room. He stretched on the bed. How can I manage one Clara after another, even for a month? he thought. But it wouldn't be a month, not if Lida found the pot of gold. And if she didn't change her mind.

If Lida didn't come, he still had seventy-five dollars. When the month was ended, Princess should be strong

again. Excitedly, he began to lay a plan of his own.

He dressed every day in one of the new outfits Belle had had tailored for him. He did this for her pleasure, though he wondered why she wanted him to dress at all since she invariably ordered him to strip and sport with her.

He made so bold as to ask, much to her delight. "Well, come look in my French mirror, you handsome brute!" she cried. She pulled him over to the full-length glass before which she preened by the hour.

"See how the brown of your coat matches your skin?" she demanded. "And how the lines of it follow your body and fit your hips? And the way it falls midway to the thigh. And the trousers—a shade lighter, made narrower than trousers were last year! And the shoes—blunt-toed and the heels just right! Why, just looking at you, makes me think of all the man underneath those clothes, and I want to tear them off and see you naked! That's why, my fancy-man—that's exactly why!"

The days passed, and the nights, and each night brought a new, veiled, affection-starved woman to him. Some were dried up, some were handsome in a ravaged way, some were old, some almost young, but they all wanted the one thing. And when they had received it, wanted more, and departed yearning and looking forward to their next allotted appointment.

As the days passed, Royal ceased to expect Lida to return. He was content that it should be so, because of his plan, and because Lida would never consent to his taking Princess with them.

CHAPTER 26

HE was lying naked on Belle's bed at three o'clock one morning of the fourth week when the key turned in the lock more quietly than usual. He watched the door swing open to reveal not Belle, and not one of the veiled women, but a painted whore in her thirties. A reek of heavy, musky perfume emanated from her.

Royal sat up, swung his feet to the floor.

She pushed the door shut and turned. "Stay where you're at, my big feller," she said. Her voice was sharp-pitched and officious. "I'm Vi . . . what's yer name?"

"Boy," he replied, remembering Belle's orders. "Did Miss Belle send you, Miss Vi?"

She laughed, a sharp-pitched laugh. "No, I just got hold of the extry key that was hid in the kitchen. She regarded him, her eyes sharp on all his parts.

She was rather tall, rather rangy, with hair dyed the same light-red as Belle's, but worn high and frizzed underneath, the whole deepening the creases that ran from nose to mouth. She was wearing a green evening dress which made her skin sallow. Royal wondered why Belle would keep such an unattractive whore, then recalled that she had remarked that Vi, beyond snooping and tattling, had other talents. Presumably these talents were revealed in bed, and the customers paid for them.

"We all figgered Belle'd got herself a stud and was

keepin' him locked away!" Vi said. "Know why? She don't spend the time downstairs she used to spend. Used to be, she was overseein' every damn thing in the place. Now, of a sudden, all we hear from Martin and Hettie is that madam is restin' in her room, madam is havin' her meals sent up to her boudoir, and also madam's quit takin' any Johns up to her room, which she does couple times a month to git jewelry. So it had to be a stud—it had to be you. And little Vi's also kept her eyes open, and she's seen a veiled woman come in the back door on three different nights, which means the madam's stud is servicin' white women!"

Royal stared at her ugliness, her venom.

"Well, speak!" commanded the whore.

"I don't know what to say, Miss Vi," Royal said honestly.

"I suppose you don't!" she cried triumphantly. "Stand up, boy . . . I want to see what Belle's been keepin' from me! She knows how important it is I get what I need, and she knows I haven't been gettin it, not with them wore-out old—turn around—come over this way—I want to feel!"

Unwillingly, complying rather than have her make a commotion, Royal walked to her and stood quiet while she handled him. She knelt suddenly and encompassed him in her mouth. He swelled helplessly. Her hot tongue flicked the tip of his organ, and it went tight and throbbing. Abruptly he stepped back, leaving her on her knees.

"No, Miss Vi," he said softly.

"Why not?" she demanded, scrambling up. "Plenty men like that, have to have it, can't do without it!"

"Yes ma'am," he said miserably, "but no."

"Nobody says no to Vi," she told him in her sharp-pitched voice. "I never had anything like you, and now I'm gettin' some, right here and right now! You either

give it to me, so I can see what it is all them white bitches are so hot about, or I'll turn you in!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, his pulse as big as his heart.

"I mean you're bound to be a runaway," she retorted. "If you was Belle's legal property, she wouldn't hide you. The rest of us'd know you was here. We couldn't touch, but you wouldn't be hid. We'd all know about the veiled women, and we'd snigger about how some rich bitch is up here ballin' it with you while her husband is in the next room ballin' it with Marge, or with me. But no—she hides you, which means you're wanted, you got a price on your head. So, my fine bed-boy, it's either bed Vi or I got to the police and report."

The door quietly opened behind the whore, and Belle came into the room. "You just try that, Vi," she said, "and see what happens. Martin," she called softly into the hallway, "you got your pistol?"

"In my pocket, Miss Belle," said Martin, stepping into sight.

"Take Miss Vi to her room," Belle ordered. "Lock her in. Bring us some supper in an hour."

"Yes Miss Belle, ma'am."

The whore stepped past the madam, head high, the lines along nose and mouth making her look like a pug-faced dog. Belle shut the door and locked it.

"I'll have Martin work her over tomorrow," she told Royal. "Not bruise her, of course. And I'll fine her soundly. She won't go to the police. There's too much I've got on her . . . she's afraid of the police."

"You'll have her whipped . . . a white girl?"

"Sure. I know, it sounds mean and cruel, but Vi's a bit batty upstairs. Another one or two are too, and they're apt to go off the deep end and do harm, as in this case, if they're not stopped. Martin'll calm her down."

"It seems she might go to the police out of spite," Royal ventured.

"She'll not turn you in," Belle said fiercely. "I'll kill her first. You're mine—I'll never give you up!"

It was in that moment that Royal knew he would have still another from whom to make his escape when the time came—his madam.

CHAPTER 27

A month had passed, and still Lee Hunnicutt had not recaptured his runaway slave. Now, in August, he reluctantly raised the reward, making the total amount seven thousand, five hundred dollars. Thus he needed the twenty-five hundred dollars in gold, plus five thousand to replace what he'd taken out of his New Orleans bank account to pay for Belle's earrings, plus a thousand or so for cash expenditures in the next few months.

Accordingly, on a gently raining midnight after his household slept, he took shovel and bag and unlighted lantern, lowered his head into the rain, and walked swiftly along the road leading to Lida's shabby house. With the house a dark hump ahead, he turned off, trudged to a mighty cypress and took twenty paces north from its base.

Here he lighted his lantern, and, after clearing away sticks and pushing undergrowth carefully aside, began to dig. He dug silently and surely from long practice. When he reached the iron pot which held the gold, his shovel did not so much as clink against its side. Meticulously he counted out five thousand dollars in gold pieces, depositing them in a bag he'd brought, and then he shoveled the wet soil back over the pot, tramped it down, scattered the sticks over it again, pulled the undergrowth into place.

He walked further into the swamp, took his bearings

from an even larger cypress, paced. This time, after he'd unearthed the second iron pot, he counted out four thousand dollars in gold pieces and repeated the reburying and concealing process. Last of all, he extinguished his lantern and made for the plantation house.

He did not see the slim dark shadow standing like a black heart in the ebony shade of a nearby cypress. And that shadow knew nothing of the bulky black spot behind some bushes on the far side of Hunnicutt, or know when it disappeared. Nor did the bulky shadow know the presence of the slim shadow.

After Hunnicutt was gone, the slim one worked into the raining night. It dug, piled gold coins into cloth bags, lugged them to the lane, dug again and buried them in a trench alongside a house. The iron pots it buried there also.

No sooner did he get back to the house and lock his nine thousand dollars into the library safe, then the restlessness took Hunnicutt afresh. He'd wanted only to be away from the plantation this past month, trying to get his hands on that runaway black. His only surcease was with whores, Belle preferably, but he wasn't going to spend another small fortune on jewelry this soon in return for her favors.

So he turned repeatedly to Lida, and for the first time even she didn't satisfy him. She seemed suddenly tame—certainly not wild as she had been before—and he was wilder than ever.

The night after he dug up the gold, he went to her. Afterward, she demanded that he marry her.

"I'm sick an' tiahed of bein' youah conveniencel" she cried. "I aim to be mistress of Hunnicutt Hill or nothin'!"

"Be nothin', then," he told her. "I've got me a wife, an' befoah long she'll be knocked-up with my son."

"Not if you spen' youah time down heah with me,

she won't" Lida flashed. "I kin fo'ce you to mahhy me, Lee Hunnicutt . . . an' don' think I won't"

"They ain' no way," he said. "You boahin' me, Lida, purely boahin' me," he repeated, and walked out.

He passed the area where once two pots of gold had lain buried, unaware that they were now gone, or that anyone might in the future follow him to his third buried pot.

The next day, observing that Princess had been up and about for some time and that she was looking exceptionally well, he told Frances that he was going to breed her to Guy, the fighting buck.

His bride cried instantly, "I don't want a pregnant maid, Leel"

"It the natural state foah a wench," he said mildly. "It tames 'em down, sweetens they natuah . . . you'll see."

He saw her sensitive face tighten, then relax. Almost, she smiled, then spoke gently, in the way he liked. "Lee," she said, "there are times when a lady, if she is to bear sons, must not be perturbed or uneasy over anything, not anything at all. She must have her house and her chamber, and above all her personal maid, one whom she comes to depend on at such a time, exactly as she wants them. So that she can . . . conceive."

Lee stared at his bride, bemused. This all made perfect sense to him. Damned if she wasn't beginning to fit the concept of the pure, ice-maiden wife, the southern lady!

"You right, my deah," he agreed. "It shall be as you want. I reckon Hunnicutt Hill kin keep operatin' without this one wench gittin' knocked-up. I got the six othah new wenches all knocked-up by Royal. An' aftah I've dealt with that nigra as he deserves, I'll git myse'f anothah Mandingo stud f'um the same tradah, maybe f'um Royal's own tribe."

He saw his bride turn from him, and this inflamed his ever-smouldering sex-hunger, and he seized her. She let him grind his seed into her without complaint, and when it was ended he knew that he must ride to Belle's place tonight and surfeit himself on one of her whores.

CHAPTER 28

"VI'S the only girl not spoken for," Belle told him as he stood impatiently at the door of the front parlor. Several gentlemen were esconced in easy chairs, smoking cigars, sipping brandy and listening to the music from the orchestra in the back parlor. "And as you can see, we've got gentlemen waiting," Belle continued. Vi's just finished a trick . . . she's in her room freshening up. You won't have to wait long."

"Youah not busy," he challenged.

"No. If you're willing to afford me."

"Damn you, Belle," he gritted. "I'll go straight up to Vi . . . they ain' no sense wastin' time foah huh to come down fu'st."

"If you're that bad off," Belle told him, "go ahead. Just knock on her door and call out who you are. You know her room."

Vi was at the mirror, a green robe belted around her, pulling and patting at her high-piled hair, when Hunnicutt opened the door in response to her bidding.

"Hell, you'd of bin foahevah," he growled. "Take that damn rag off."

"You in a hurry, or something?" she demanded, turning from the mirror and dropping the robe. It revealed her rangy figure with hard, flat breasts and thigh bones that showed. Her patch was a dirty tan. "You'd of ripped my clothes off of me like that one time, huh?"

"You ain' no Belle," he told her, throwing off his own

clothes. "An' you ain' no Conchita or Dolores. No reason a man'd wan' to undress you 'cept to git clothes cluttah out of his way."

Her face contorted. She came at him, raking her nails down his chest. "You bastard!" she screamed. "I'll have you know I'm a good whore! Men pay to git me . . . I don't pay them! Like the women that come to the side door for that big stud Belle's gone batty over!"

"What big stud?" Hunnicutt demanded, holding her at arm's length.

"The one Belle hides in the attic over her room! The one she whipped me over!" screamed Vi, still torn by rage, struggling to get out of his grip. "The one she got swell clothes for! The one that ought to be turned in to the police, 'cause it's wrote all over him he's a runaway!"

He let her go so suddenly she staggered. "I got a runaway!" he breathed.

"It's the same one!" she cried. "Whyn't you find out?"

He threw coat and shirt on, went headlong out of the room and down the stairs in search of Belle. She was seeing a client out. When she closed the door, they were alone in the foyer.

"You got him," he accused, "you got my stud! You usin' him to subvise white women! I wan' him this instant! You tuhn him ovah, I'll keep quiet, not even ask how you got him, an' I'll take it out in trade . . . with you! But you make me trouble, you even hol' youah mouth wrong, an' I'll tuhn you ovah to the police!"

Belle was suddenly pale under her rouge, but her red head was high and haughty. "Someone's been telling you fairy tales," she said. "It was Vi. That ugly bitch! This is the last snooping and tattling—it's lies, Lee Hunnicutt, but the last lies she'll tell in my house!"

"Tuhn my stud ovah, Belle," Hunnicutt repeated. "Tuhn my prop'ty back to me. Now."

"I've got nothing of yours," Belle said fiercely. "Get out of my establishment, and never show your face here again!"

He yanked the door open, went through and slammed it.

Belle fled upstairs. Royal was stretched on the bed, naked. She locked the door. "There isn't time!" she whispered. "Hunnicutt knows you're here! He's gone to the police! Get dressed . . . I'll pack your things!"

CHAPTER 29

ROYAL walked along Basin Street, carrying a valise, his seventy-five dollars in his pocket, Belle's admonitions in his ears. He kept his pace under control, avoiding his natural, space-consuming half-lope, yet still he moved with more swiftness than other men.

Past brothels he went, past family houses, across Conti Street, on to St. Louis Street, which he followed past Rampart, Burgundy, Daphne, Bourbon, Royal Street and on. He knew restaurants and night spots were closing, for it was two o'clock in the morning, and he might meet people starting home.

"Do nothing to draw attention to yourself," Belle had cautioned. "People are bound to notice you, for you're well-dressed and big and fine-looking and a Negro, but if you act unconcerned, they won't be suspicious."

"I undahstand," he had assured her, aquiver inside.

"You mustn't be furtive," Belle insisted. "Your fine clothes and tall hat are in your favor. Even if the police are after you this minute, you don't look like a runaway slave."

What Belle said was true, Royal thought, keeping to his easy stride across Chartres Street and Decatur, heading toward the wharves where he could get lost. Hunnicutt might suspect that he would now be well-dressed, so it was doubly necessary to exercise the utmost caution.

An occasional carriage passed, the horses' hooves clomp-

ping on the hard surface of the street. Once he met a solitary pedestrian. The man gave no sign of noticing that Royal was black or that he was carrying a valise.

Most of the houses were dark, their occupants asleep. There was a light here and there; some of the sporting houses had a red lamp in a front window. From one or two came faint sounds of laughter and music.

Now, never permitting himself to increase his speed, Royal was passing the one-storied wooden cribs, rows of single rooms in each of which waited a bureau, a bed, and a woman. Here, though it was against the law, the cheap whores solicited trade from men and bums; here they serviced them for as little as a quarter, Belle had told him.

From some of them Royal heard grunts, from others the groan of passion; once he heard laughter. Only a few showed a glimmer of light; for the most part, it seemed, the street whores plied their trade in tiny darkness.

Ahead, from down the row, a slight figure grew out of the night, approaching him. Royal could see, as she neared, that she was small and thin, with dark hair to her shoulders.

"Want to have a good time, mister?" she whined. "I kin show you a real good time!"

If he were seen strolling with his arm around a whore, he thought, who would suspect him of being a runaway? Especially if he kept out of the light so none could tell he was a black man with a white whore.

"I might want to," he said warily, "but I ain't white."

"Who cares?" the whore retorted. "A John's a John. You got money, ain't you?"

"I can pay," he replied.

She snuggled up to him, and he put his arm around her.

"It's up here a piece," she said, urging him along the banquette. "I keep a sheet on my mattress . . . a

clean one every week. Most of these whores use the same sheet a year or just the bare mattress. But I got more respect for my clients. Remember that, and always ask for Josie."

"I will," he promised because she wanted the promise.

"I charge fifty cents," she warned.

"How much for all night?" he asked. "Until tomorrow night?"

"Five dollars. Gold."

"I'll pay it," he said, knowing she would settle for less, knowing the rent on her crib wasn't above three and one half dollars a week, but not inclined to bargain. Five dollars would buy him safety; the police weren't likely to think of looking for Lee Hunnicutt's runaway stud in the crib of a cheap white waterfront whore. By nightfall they would have passed the first fever of search; by that time they'd expect him to be out of New Orleans, making a run for the North

"Here it is," Josie said, tugging him through a door. He heard her fumble in the darkness. A friction match flared and she held it to a candle which guttered, caught, and burned, throwing pale light over the crib.

The whore was well into her thirties, wiry and with a terrible sort of hungry eagerness on her thin face and tight mouth. Her eyes were long and wide and glittered in the candle light.

"My, you're a fine buck!" she exclaimed. "What's your name?"

"Boy . . . call me Boy," he said.

"Five dollars," she said, and held out her open hand.

He put the gold piece in it, she examined it under the candle flame, tucked it into her bureau drawer. Then she began industriously stripping off her dress, under which she was nude. Her body was scrawny, with hard little breasts which held hard, tiny nipples in their centers.

"Well?" she prodded. "You in a hurry or not?"

She was no more repulsive than the women he'd been servicing, he thought, carefully taking off his new clothes and draping them on the one chair. Only this time the act was his own free choice, a decision he had made to endure his safety.

He joined her on the mattress. At one time she whimpered and sobbed and rejoiced, her sharp nails digging into his buttocks.

Afterward she began to talk. "You the best John I ever had on this mattress, you know that?" she asked. "Good as you are, you could git any black girl. Or do you like 'em white?"

"I ain't never wanted white girls," he said truthfully.

"And the way you're dressed," she went on. "How come you at the cribs, anyhow? If you don't want a white girl."

"I was just walking along," he told her, "on my way to a room somewhere, I reckon. Then I met you."

"What you doing with that valise? You going to take a trip?"

"I might," he replied cautiously. Maybe she could be hired to help him.

"I hope you ain't figurin' to go on a steamboat," she said. "Don't think that any captain will let a nigger just walk onto his boat. Have you got freedom papers . . . have you got papers saying you can ride on a steamboat, boy?"

CHAPTER 30

LONG before daylight, indeed shortly after he alerted the police, Hunnicutt stormed back to Belle's Pleasure Palace, two officers with him. "He's likely run," he told the officers. "I know that well as you do, but I wan' all three floahs of that house searched, just the samel"

At Belle's, he rang vigorously, rang again before Martin opened and stood barring the way.

"Police," said the officer named Brady. "We're going to search the premises for a runaway slave named Royal. Stand aside."

Martin shook his white head, his face stern. "I sorry Mistah Officah, but Miss Belle's got two clients foah the night. She couldn' no way vi'late theah privacy."

"Privacy, hell!" Hunnicutt swore. "If my slave's heah, I aim to git him, even if I walk in on the mayah himse'f!"

"Let the gentlemen in, Martin," said Belle's throaty voice from the depths of the foyer. "I ask only one favor, gentlemen," she continued as they entered, "and that is when you come to Lucy Ann's room and Esther's, you'll hold in mind that they're entertaining, and be satisfied to let the two gentlemen show you their hands from under the sheet to prove their race. I'll so inform them, with your permission. As for a runaway slave, you won't find a black on the place except the five who belong—Martin here, Hettie the cook, and the three maids."

And, though the officers climbed up and down stairs, looking into every room, even Belle's, from it climbing to the attic room above, they found no sign of Royal. Hunnicutt himself examined the little room; there was no trace of his slave's having occupied it, though he was certain it had sheltered Royal. Once he started to ask Belle how the black had ever got into her hands, then angrily dismissed the impulse. She would only deny everything again.

Angrily he nodded when Brady said, "Mr. Hunnicutt, if yer slave was here, he ain't here now. We'll likely concentrate on searchin' the waterfront. The chief's got men out there now."

When he parted from the officers, Hunnicutt sought out and entered an all-night waterfront saloon, a dark and noisome place patronized by furtive men, by the roughest sailors, and by thugs who hired out for jobs of violence. From among these latter, before he left the dive, he hired three strongarms to help him personally comb the waterfront.

"Chances are he's dressed up," he explained to the three. "He's bin kep' by a madame, an' she'd want him fancy, so don' neglect to suspect evah big niggah of this 'one's description, no mattah how he's dressed, or what he's doin'. Pay pahticulah attention to boats. It ain' logical that a dressed-up niggah will make foah the swamp."

CHAPTER 31

IN the crib, at the time Hunnicutt was hiring his strong-arms, Royal was holding Josie the whore in his arms because she demanded it in the way the female demands. He worked one of her hard little nipples between his thumb and forefinger and she began to whimper and nuzzle and caress him, and he slowly grew and hardened, despite his reluctance.

"No," she whimpered, "now!" And again he serviced her because he must, because his safety depended upon her. He let her love passage squeeze him, and at the end exploded almost gratefully, for she was adept at the act of love.

She lay in his arms then as others had lain, and whispered as others had whispered. "I want to go with you," she whispered. "I know you're on the run . . . I feel it. I know you're hiding here with me, but if you take me along you won't need to hide, I'll get you false papers, the mistress traveling with her slave."

"Thank you," he said gently, "but I can't do that."

"Why not? It's been done before. We can do it, too."

"No," he repeated. "Thank you, but no."

"I can report you to the police," she threatened. "I can find out if you can stand investigation."

"I mean no offense, Miss," he said gently, "but can you stand police investigation?"

"Of course I can!" she retorted. "I put my quarter

on the doorstep every night for the man on the beat. I pay—what more do they want?"

"I wouldn't know that, Miss," he replied, "but they have many laws and customs. It would be difficult for anyone to obey them all."

She lay quiet.

"All right," she said at last. "What have I got to gain by running with a nigger slave, anyhow? Even if you are the only stud that can make me feel anything? I'd have to work at my trade to feed you."

"Yes, Miss," he agreed, not breathing easily yet.

"Tell you what," she said. "I'll get you fake freedom papers if you'll pay me as much as you pay the faker."

"I haven't much money, Miss," he told her doubtfully.

"How much?"

"Seventy dollars gold, Miss. I had seventy-five, and paid you five."

"I don't know if anybody'll fix papers for thirty-five," she said. "But I'll see what I can do. That leaves you broke, but after you'd git away from New Orleans, you'd have a paper to show you're a free man."

"I need that chance," he agreed. "To get out of the city."

"I'll hurry," she said. "I'll try to git back before daylight. And I'll bring bread and cheese."

Actually she was back in less than half an hour. She laid a packet of food on the bureau. "This is enough to last till you leave," she said, "and some to take with you. I found Bennie. He was in Durock's Saloon. He's willing to talk to you. Come in, Bennie," she called.

Royal sat up, wearing only his underdrawers. As the white man entered, he stood.

Bennie was short, shabby and emaciated, with a smell of rum wafting from him. But he appeared to be sober, for his eyes were shrewd and they pierced over Royal.

"Yer a runaway," he announced. "Else ye wouldn't want no papers."

Royal waited, meeting that shrewd gaze. He didn't trust this little man. He wished he hadn't agreed to let Josie try to get him freedom papers.

"But that's my business, making out papers fer the likes of ye," Bennie continued. "If ye kin pay me enough to make it worth my risk . . . fer I run a big risk, un'erstand?"

"Yes, suh," Royal conceded.

His own risk was greater; his freedom, perhaps his very life, was at stake.

"Fifty dollars," Bennie said.

"I can't pay ovah thirty-five, suh," Royal said. "I've got to pay Miss Josie same as I pay you."

Bennie turned to the door. "Ain't no good talkin'," he said. "That's my price."

"How about forty?" Josie asked, and Bennie halted. Royal's blood surged.

Bennie shook his head, got half through the door.

"Forty . . . five of it in trade," Josie offered. "That's ten times with me, Bennie. And you don't have to lay out no cash at all."

He considered. "Seven-fifty in trade," he countered.

She tossed her head; her hair bounced on her shoulders. "You know I'm the only whore can squeeze that little dingus you got the right way," she told him. "Thirty-five cash and five in trade. With an extra go each time if you kin manage it. And that's final."

"Beginnin' when?" he demanded.

"Soon's this John gits away with his freedom paper."

Bennie nodded. "I'll be back by dark. And don't try to git me to hurry—these papers is a work of art."

"Can we count on you being here at dark?" Josie pressed.

"Ye kin count on it," Bennie said and departed.

"Do you trust him?" Royal asked.

Josie thought it through. "I never knowed Bennie to break his word once he give it," she decided. "If

he says he'll be here at dark, he'l be here at dark."

"But he didn't say he'd have the papers," Royal quietly pointed out.

"Say, what's wrong with you?" she demanded. "Who're you to git suspicious. You're gittin' your papers—what more you want?"

But he was uneasy, and the uneasiness grew. He moved to the door and looked out. Soon it would be daylight and unsafe for him to be seen with or without the freedom paper; in fact, it wouldn't be really safe even after he got out of New Orleans.

There was nothing he could do but wait for darkness.

"Come on," Josie urged, an edge still on her voice, "let's have another go, huh? And then some sleep?"

He half-slept, ever aware of daylight outside, ever aware of Josie the whore who was deep asleep with her body against his. When he shifted position, she followed him and slept on, deeply and with scarcely a sound of breathing.

And his uneasiness increased, his sense of urgency mounted.

CHAPTER 32

ROYAL was dressed and waiting before dark. Josie the whore, sated at last, lay watching him with a mixture of contentment and discontentment.

"It's a shame you're a nigger," she sighed.

"Why is it a shame, Miss?"

"You're a real man, that's why. The kind of man a woman could marry and be glad of, if you was only white. I been to bed with so many Johns I couldn't count 'em to save my life, and you're the only one I ever wanted to take on twice, let alone how many times I've took you on since we met."

"Thank you, Miss," he said, knowing she meant to praise him.

Would it never grow dark, he wondered, would this conversation never end? Would Bennie never come?

Bennie arrived thirty minutes after dark had settled. One moment he wasn't there, and the next moment he had opened the door and stood in the candlelight before them.

"I got the paper," he said. "Where's the money?"

"Let me see the paper," Josie challenged. "Let me read it. What name did you give him?"

"Charles Long, Free man of Color," Bennie replied. "Read it fer yerself."

Royal watched Josie hold it to the light of the candle. She read it slowly, from start to finish, her lips moving

on the words, sometimes stumbling, but never ceasing. At last she looked up.

"It seems all right," she told Royal. She started to hand it to him, but Bennie snatched it.

"The cash first," he said.

Royal brought forth his gold. Carefully, with both the others hanging over him, he counted out the pieces into two piles on the mattress.

"Thirty-five in this one, suh," he said, "and thirty-five in this othah one, Miss. Now can I have the paper?"

Bennie, who had counted as Royal laid the gold pieces on the mattress, thrust the paper at him, scooped up his share and tied it in a kerchief. "You best git," he warned. "They's descriptions of you out, and they's a big re-ward—seven thousand, five hundred dollars fer the lucky man that leads to yer capture." With that he darted out the door and away.

Royal lifted his valise, took his tall hat into the other hand. "Thank you, Miss Josie," he said, "and goodbye."

She was scooping up her gold as he stepped onto the banquette.

He looked first in one direction, then in the other. His blood began to surge, then held steady, neither quickening nor slowing. There was no one in sight, not even along the row of crib doors.

He began to walk toward the wharf, his step leisured, moving casually. One whore called from the window of her crib, "Hey, big boy, want to have a good time?" and he walked unconcernedly on, his blood at that hard, steady surge.

One square without incident . . . two squares. Ahead, moored at the wharf, were the bulky outlines of steamboats, ocean going vessels, barges. There was the smell of the Mississippi, the sound of it lapping against the boats and the wharf.

Suddenly he sensed movement behind him. The surging blood quickened, but his pace did not. Somehow he held it steady, kept it unhurried and casual.

Just ahead on the dark wharf were walls of baled cotton stacked ready for lading, boxes and crated goods, kegs stacked on top of each other in long rows. If he could get there, to those corridors of goods, he could lose himself.

Now the movement behind him was close and he whirled because he had to, could not let anyone sneak up and put a knife between his ribs. There were six men converging on him; his scalp prickled so hard it seemed to rise off his skull, and he turned to run.

"That's him!" yelled the master's voice. "Stop him!"

He flung the valise at them, hitting the group in the center, slowing them. He ran, stretched his legs and ran, the pound of feet loud behind him, thunder in his ears. He pulled ahead, his vast stride half again the equal of theirs, and their sound was not so loud.

He hurtled like the wind. He raced harder, pursuit less loud still, his heart high in his chest pumping fast, legs never missing their rhythm.

And then the strolling whore darted in front of him, crying her cry, "Want to have a good time?" and he was smashing into her and they were falling headlong, her on her back and him flat on her. And the footsteps were upon him and hands, any number of hands seized and hauled him backward to his feet.

"Git irons on him, officah!" the master was shouting. "He's a bad one . . . it a wondah he didn' kill that whoah he hid with or that Bennie who tol' us . . . but he's too stupid to git suspicious, I reckon!"

The picture of betrayal which the master's words painted shot rage through Royal. Three men were holding him. He gauged the position and strength of their grip, gave one mighty yank, and wrenched free. This threw them enough off balance that they shifted

position, and as the brawniest policeman came back to stance, club lifted, Royal crashed his fist over the fellow's heart and he plummeted backward and lay still.

Royal glimpsed the other officer's club coming at his head and danced aside. With the officer off-balance from his undelivered blow, Royal clouted him on the side of the head.

Now one of the river-front ruffians charged from the left as the officer, club ready again, came from the right. Royal shot his foot out, hooked it across the officer's ankles and scooped him off his feet. At the same time, the ruffian's fist drove into Royal's neck and a second ruffian jumped him from behind, grappling for his throat.

Royal shot his hands up and back of his shoulders, got his powerful fingers around the ruffian's neck and sank his thumbs brutally into the windpipe. The third ruffian hammered a fist into Royal's nose. He staggered for balance, pushing his thumbs into that windpipe.

The hands ceased grappling at Royal's throat; he dug deeper into the gullet of the fellow on his back. The arms fell and dangled. The other ruffians landed blows to Royal's chin, eye, jaw. Only then did he loosen his grip and let the body fall.

"He's kilt him, the gawdamned nigger's kilt a white man!" yelled one of the remaining ruffians.

They were all over Royal now—two ruffians and two policemen, the first one having pulled himself to his feet and reentered the melee. The master was the only one Royal didn't see, but he could hear him shouting: "Don' kill him . . . take him alive!"

The policeman was in front of Royal everywhere he turned, nightstick banging his head. Royal tried to get at him, but the others were raining blows all over him. Their knees slammed into his kidneys, into his groin. Despite his pain, he brought his knee into the policeman's groin and the officer fell and writhed and there were only three to fight.

He danced constantly, the second policeman after him now with his club. He fended off a few blows, a few clouts, danced aside so that some glanced off his shoulder, head, jaw. The rest he took full-on, driving his own fists mercilessly. One furious blow connected with the policeman's wrist, the club went flying, and the man doubled.

Shaking his beaten head in an effort to clear it, he kept on the move, slugging with the two remaining ruffians. One was hitting for his kidneys, the other for his heart. He kept pounding them mercilessly, aiming for neck and gut.

Straining so that his own guts felt like they were coming up his throat, Royal leapt toward the bigger ruffian, slamming first one fist, then the other into the fellow's gullet. The ruffian went staggering backward, and even as he crashed, the other hammered down on the back of Royal's head and sent him catapulting forward.

Instinctively, to keep from falling, Royal began to run. Circlets of sparks rayed out from his eyes against the darkness. With a bellow he caught his balance, whirled and charged the ruffian. His head drove into the belly; the ruffian's fists hammered the back of his neck, and they both fell.

Royal took time for one crushing blow to the fellow's brow, then surged to his feet and bolted along the wharf. He couldn't see where he was going; his head was thick and the halos of sparks blinded him. He bounded on to where he knew there were walls of cotton bales, corridors of bales.

He crouched in one of the corridors. His breath was pure pain which filled his gullet and belly, but which must be pulled in and pushed out, let it cut and burn. Those sparks were everywhere; his head was getting thicker.

"Search the wharf!" he heard the master cry. "Look

behin' evah cotton bale, evah keg . . . he can't be fah . . . I want that niggah!"

So the officers and ruffians were reviving. They'd be after him any moment, combing the waterfront.

He crouched behind the bales, rubbed his eyes to wipe away the halos of sparks, and failed. Sweating, he labored to regain his wind, his breath stabbing deeper and deeper.

He listened to the relentless search being made for him.

CHAPTER 33

BACK at the edge of Hunnicutt Hill, Lida was digging three secret holes on her wild ten acres. Into each hole she put a bag of the gold pieces she had dug up on that rainy night and hidden in a trench beside her house.

A month had passed and she was rich indeed. There had been over forty thousand dollars in the pots. It was enough to take Royal and go anywhere, to Europe even.

But there was another pot of gold, which meant she'd have at least sixty thousand dollars if she got it. Meanwhile, Royal was safely tucked away at Belle's; Lida could claim him any time she chose.

Meantime, she'd wait until Lee missed his gold. His natural reaction would be to rush straight to his other two hoards to see if they were safe. Once she found out, thus, where the third pot was, she'd get it, too.

Then she'd make her big play for what she really wanted, for Lee to marry her. For him to get rid of Frances and make his cousin, Lida Hunnicutt, mistress of Hunnicutt Hill. In exchange, he would get back his gold.

Even if he beat her she wouldn't tell him where the gold was until he married her. If he brought in the police, she would deny everything. After that, if he refused to marry her at all, she'd dig up the gold and

go to Europe with Royal. Either way, she'd be the winner.

Her heart beat fast in anticipation as she made her way back to the shabby old cottage where she wouldn't have to live much longer, not much longer at all, regardless of which turn her plans took. She was completely unaware of the silent, bulky shadow which followed her, keeping ever behind trees and growth.

Sam Slocum, overseer, had watched Hunnicutt dig up them pots of gold the night it rained, watched from a tree, listened to the rain, caught the clink of gold pieces as the other man counted them out. He'd seen the other watcher, hugging another tree, a small black shadow that moved within the tree darkness, and had known it was Lida.

When he returned to do some digging of his own, he found both pots of gold gone. Staring at the empty holes, a tide of rage climbed his body. Then he cursed. It was his gold. He'd been on the prowl for it for two years, and now when he had found it, some one had got here first.

So the beautiful slut found the pots, did she? His anger cooled a trifle. He'd keep a sharp watch on her now, as well as on Hunnicutt. She'd never be able to stay away from the gold. She'd have to gloat over it. He knew how she was, could appreciate it. Let him once get that gold, and he'd scoop it into his hands, let it run richly through his fingers. scoop again.

Tomorrow he'd start his plan to leave by hinting to Hunnicutt that he was going back to Alabama one of these days to take over his brother's little farm. That way, Hunnicutt would not suspect his overseer, not even if he should miss the gold in the meantime. And if he should ever suspect his overseer, Slocum would be across the waters.

Him and Lida both. He'd keep watch to see she didn't take the gold and run. When he was ready to go, he'd take her with him. He'd marry her and she'd have a husband to escort her all over Europe. The plantation owners wouldn't be the only ones making a trip to Paris once Slocum got his hands on them two pots of gold. To hell with the third pot; he knew when to stop. Before Hunnicutt forced him to kill another nigger. And he'd sure as hell stay where he'd never have to see a dirty, stinking nigger again. Or smell one. Or bed one.

Lida was the best in bed. Slocum knew, because he'd watched through the window when she and Hunnicutt forgot to put out the lamp. Slocum could talk sense into that slut, browbeat it in. And once she got a taste of his peter, she'd forget the high and mighty cousin who thought she wasn't good enough for him.

And Sam Slocum would be married to a Hunnicutt.

CHAPTER 34

BEHIND the bales, Royal waited, unable to see well, but with his breath easier. He listened to the five men searching for him, trying to place the whereabouts of each one.

Two were going along the boats moored in this area, one shoted from the opposite end of the area, and the remaining two seemed to be systematically prowling the aisles formed by cotton bales and kegs.

They were moving toward Royal. He had to make a run now, whether he could see or not, even if his head swelled and burst and filled the night with halos.

He got into a standing crouch and listened. Nothing had changed. Silently he made for the banquette, thinking briefly of Josie's crib, knowing none of the cribs was safe now. He stretched his legs, let them cover distance at a half-lope, turned north.

"Theah he is!" he heard the master shout, and then he began to run. "Stop that niggah!" the master was shouting.

He increased his speed, passed a strolling whore and her client, passed a man reeling with rum. Here was a corner; he could barely discern it with his head thickening and his vision dazzled by the sparks. He sped along the new street, ears filled with the pounding of his feet and the cries from behind.

Here the houses had lights in them; there were high walls around courtyards, locked iron gates. Here were

people; rich people eating fine food in safety, not being chased like a wild animal through the streets.

The shouts back there were louder, the feet heavier. His head was pounding louder than his feet or theirs. The rays of light that stood before his eyes were blinding him. On he ran, peering desperately through the circles of light, running faster, going in great, leaping bounds along the banquette.

Here was another house, and it stood dark within its cast iron fence. Risking no time on thought, Royal gripped the bars and in a running leap vaulted over the top and landed beyond some bushes in the darkest part of a courtyard. For a small moment he slept or lost consciousness, then he heard the master and his men running past, the master shouting, "He's tuhned the nex' cohnah . . . don' let him git away!"

When they had pounded on, Royal pulled himself to his feet. It wasn't safe to stay here. He shook his head grogily; it didn't help. He strained and squinted to see the house, and made out that it was two-storied.

To be dark so early in the evening must mean no one was at home, not even servants. He moved to the house and began to seek along its iron-barred windows.

There was no getting in at a window. There was glass in the front door, and he doubled his fist and gave one mighty blow and it shattered. He waited, not breathing, his heart pounding so loud he didn't know whether or not he could hear anyone within, disturbed by shattering glass. But there was only his heart and his breathing. At last he reached through the glass, felt around, located a knob lock, opened the door and entered.

He groped through the inky rooms, the only light those mysterious sparks around his eyes, until he found a kitchen and a kitchen door. There he stretched out on the floor and felt himself instantly losing consciousness.

When he woke up—or came to—the house was utterly silent. There was no sound of his pursuers. His head had thickened further and was pounding violently.

He had no idea how long he'd been here, moments or hours. He must get away before the people who lived in the house returned, before Hunnicutt and his party retraced their path.

He staggered up, got his balance. His head. It seemed to be his head, which had been so mercilessly pounded that troubled him. He felt it over; there was no blood. The only blood was a bit on his knuckles, where he'd broken the glass in the door. The sparks before his eyes were nearly gone.

He turned the key in the lock of the kitchen door, opened it and went through. The night had deepened; it seemed to be very late. He slipped to the iron fence where he had entered the courtyard and stood listening. There was no sound. There were two big houses across the street, and they were dark; the pinpoint of light he at first thought he saw in one of them proved to be that spark-trick of his eyes. His head pounded and his blood pounded. If he was going to get out of New Orleans, it had to be now. He felt in his coat pocket, and his freedom paper was there.

With a powerful surge of his body, he vaulted the fence and landed on his feet in an instant run. He raced the streets, silent and swift, raced through the sleeping night, making ever to the north, to the direction in which lay freedom.

He found the road which led from the city and followed it until a smaller road curved off to the south and east, to the Delta. Along this he raced, silent and fleet despite his aching head and his blurring vision. He raced on and on, under black sky, past sleeping house, once past barking dogs, faster past the dogs, his heart standing quiet as he fled until the dogs were

behind and ahead lay only the little road, winding darkly to the Delta.

In predawn, he felt himself plunge face first into the soft dust of the road, and when he tried to move he felt himself go to sleep or become unconscious, he couldn't tell which.

When it was, he didn't know, but he opened his eyes and could see, dully. It was dirty daylight. He was in a small room, its walls papered with newspaper, the floor bare. There was a skimpy white curtain at the window. He lay in a narrow bed, which was the only furniture in the room except for a crate set up as a dresser with a small, mottled mirror hanging over it.

He sat up, making the bed squeak. He was ready to run, but a wave of dizziness swept through his head and he could only drop his face into his hands and wait for the dizziness to pass. When he looked up, trying out his eyes, a Negro man and woman were in the room, gazing at him.

"Take it easy, son," the man said. "We youah friens. . . . I'm Sidney Bland an' this is my wife, Nancy."

Royal stared at them. He couldn't think, not with this thick head. The pair were in their sixties, small and wiry and brown. Both had snow-white wool and kind faces.

"We know you a runaway," Sidney said. "We pick you up dis mawnin' in front ouah cabin. Nobody at de big house see us, not the mastah noah none of the othah slaves. Dey don' know you heah . . . you bin safe all day, son. It gittin' on foah night now."

"I'll leave when it's dark," Royal said. Even his tongue didn't work willingly. He shook his head, trying to get rid of the thickness.

"You git hit on de haid, son?" asked Sidney.

"Quite a few times."

"You addled," the slave said. "I seen it befoah . . . man gits hit on de haid, he go unconscious like you done. He see stahs, too. Did you see stahs, son?"

"Sparks," Royal admitted.

Sidney and Nancy both were nodding. "Youah head bin addled," Sidney affirmed. "Sometimes a head-addlin' like that pah'lizes a man all down one side."

"Par'lize?" repeated Royal. "What's that?"

"He can't move, can't walk or even lif' his han'. Sometimes he git well . . . sometimes he die."

"I ain't got time to be par'lized," Royal said, "or to die."

"You git some of Nancy's cookin' in you," Sidney said. "Den put on youah fine clo's that she patched de toahn places an' ironed."

"Why are you helping me?" Royal asked. "For all you know, I got a price on my head."

"We knows theah's a rewahd, son," Sidney said. "We figuah you huntin' an undahgroun' . . . dat you tryin' to git no'th. Ain' that right?"

Royal nodded.

"Theah ain' no sech depot in these pahts," Sidney continued. "You got to make it alone. If we 'us youngah, we'd try it ouahsefs. But we too ol' to adapt up no'th even if we lived to git theah, an' we don' know wheah any of ouah chillun is that might he'p us—we 'us sol' apaht befoah they 'us ol' enough to remembah dey mammy an' pappy. So now we he'p you what we kin—a young man an' strong—he'p him on his way no'th so his chillun be free."

"You got no call to be so good to me," Royal said humbly.

"You ouah own kin' . . . you might be ouah gran'son," Sidney replied. "Nancy, git the boy his clo'es."

Wearing his fine suit which Nancy had restored to new condition, Royal feasted on her cooking. The hush-

puppies melted in his mouth, the deep-fried fatback was succulent, and the taste and feels of greens and potlikker was good on his teeth and tongue.

When night had begun to deepen, he shook hands with the old pair. "We won' ax wheah you headin', son," the old man said. "It bettah we don' know . . . we ain' saw you, you nevah bin heah."

Royal left them, carrying cornpone and fatback in a small package. He moved swiftly along the road where only hours ago he had fallen. He was now like any slave on the run, without the gold on which he had based his plans. He was afoot, without a friend to help him. He was better dressed than the usual runaway, and he had the freak freedom paper, but dared not use it in these parts. The name of it—Charles Long—would be known to the master and police alike.

Also, there definitely was something wrong with him. His head was still thick—it ached and pounded, and he still saw an occasional spark. There was a stiffness in his right leg, along his right arm, down his right side, but he walked doggedly on, swinging that stiffening leg in his great, ground-covering stride.

He had to keep moving, no matter what. He would travel by night, hide by day.

He would keep to the plan he had laid in New Orleans, gold or no gold. A full month had passed since Princess had lost her baby. She would be well now, strong again.

He was going back for Princess. He was going to kidnap her and and take her to Boston with him.

CHAPTER 35

THERE was no moon; there were no stars. There was only the occasional double halo of sparks and the unceasing pounding of his head. Yet he could discern enough to tell which was road and which was field, to descry house and stable hunched in the night, enough to keep swinging along with unbroken stride.

He bore south and east, ever toward the river. The night was heavy with heat and humidity; sweat ran in streams over his body beneath the fine suit. Walking, he pulled off the coat, maneuvering his stiffening right arm out of the sleeve, folding the coat to carry across his arm. For a time this was a relief, but soon he found himself wishing he could strip and walk naked.

No, he thought heavily, not walk, but drop to cool, damp grass naked. Shut my eyes and let come what will come, sleep or unconsciousness. Give in the addled brain and die or live, as it sees fit.

But even as he thought thus, he put his will behind the stiffening leg and swung it in ever a new step. I got to go, he thought, no matter what. I got to get to Princess.

He heard the toot of a river boat and bore left to keep within sound of the river, yet avoid the river road where he might be seen. All he had to do was follow the river and it would take him to Hunnicutt Hill.

Ahead was a small cottage with no light showing, behind it a small, dark stable. While he was looking

at these, his right side went numb and he fell. Unexpectedly and flat on his face, he fell. When he pushed up, only his left arm worked, and when he got to his feet, only his left leg was dependable. There was a queer numbness to his whole right side.

Teeth clamped, he dragged his right leg slowly forward, bore weight on it, swung the left, forced the right again. Like that he progressed, far less swiftly than before, cutting across pasture toward the little stable. After many forced steps the numbness receded somewhat and he covered ground with less effort but no speed.

The numbness was less still by the time he reached the rail fence. He swung his left leg over the top rail, pulled the stiff right leg across, and he was in the stable lot. He stood listening for any noise of farmer or barking dog, and there was nothing but night sounds. A thing the slaves at Hunnicutt Hill called a cicada was making its noises, and from the swamps came the faint and constant croak of frogs.

From outside the stable door came movement and a flutter of nostrils. Royal moved toward the dark spot from which the sounds had come. "Easy boy," he whispered, hand out, "that's a good horse . . . steady now."

His hand came onto the shoulder of the horse. He patted, ran his hand up the mane, past the ears, down the face to the nose, which pressed and nuzzled, seeking sugar or tidbit. He caressed the nose, whispering.

After a moment, he slipped into the stable. Here was the smell of cow, the sound of a cow steadily chewing. Chickens shifted on their roosts, clucking in the darkness.

He fumbled along the wall on each side of the door. In one corner he found nails from which hung harness and searched among straps and buckles until he found the bit and straps of a bridle. This he took with him

and returned to the horse. He laid his coat across the withers, slipped the bit into the horse's mouth and the bridle over its head and buckled it, his right hand clumsy but functioning.

Leading the horse, he started along the fence, his leg moving a trifle better, making his right hand do the work of tracing the rails to the gate. He found it on the second side of the lot and led the horse through. He took long enough to close the gate; thus, at day-break if the farmer looked out he would see nothing wrong and Royal would have a bit longer before the theft of the horse was discovered, a bit longer before anyone connected a stolen horse with the runaway slave.

He mounted bareback, lifted the reins, pressed his heels into the flanks. The horse tossed his head and whinnied, and then started off at a fast walk.

A shadow so thin it looked like a tall dart, materialized in front of the horse, which stopped and whinnied again. "Git off!" ordered a voice as sharp as the cutting edge of a knife. "I got a rifle on ye. I bin watchin'. My dawg give me wahnin' . . . he whined an' I shet him up. Git down, ye hoss thief!"

Royal slid off the horse and onto the shadow in one vast, flowing motion. With his strong left hand he gripped the wrist of the shadow's right hand, the one which held the gun. It was a rigid, iron-strong wrist though not thick, and it gave only as a bar of iron would give, rigidly and straight back and down. It did not bend, and the gun did not drop from the iron fingers which gripped it.

Now Royal gave a relentless wrench, and the wrist turned and the rifle discharged, the bullet burning along Royal's left hip, and then it fell to the ground. Royal shot out his right arm stiffly, hooked it around the fellow's neck and squeezed. The iron fists pounded him in the ribs, the belly. He brought his left fist crashing into his assailant's neck, heard the gasp, crashed again,

and when the other sagged, dropped him to the ground. Stooping, he swept up the rifle and jumped astride the horse. He shook the reins, urging the animal into an instant gallop.

The farmer's wife might even now be running across the yard, the barking dog at her heels. At best it would be only moments before she found her fallen husband, before she sounded the alarm that someone, some thief, had beaten her man unconscious and stolen his rifle and his horse.

Royal kicked his heels against the horse's flanks. "Fastah, boy!" he urged. "Fastah!"

Armed now, and with a horse, Royal rode for the plantation. There was much yet to be accomplished, he thought, but he was on his way . . . he was on his way.

CHAPTER 36

AFTER they lost Royal, Lee Hunnicutt tarried in New Orleans only long enough to raise the reward for his runaway slave to ten thousand dollars. He talked briefly to the chief of police, a red-faced, muscular man.

"I know ouah men are still searchin'," he said, "an' so are the two I hiahed. But I'm suah the niggah's escaped f'um the city an' is headin' no'th. Keep lookin' head, but sen' wohd along all routes, sen' to othah states. Ten thousan' should tempt mos' any police officiah. An' if the black is captuahed through youah effohts suh, even as a result of youah notifyin' othah chiefs in othah states, they'll be an extra thousan' go in youah pocket as a token of my appreciation."

He galloped his horse all the way to Hunnicutt Hill. The animal was in a lather when he vaulted off at the stable, not so much as glancing at Wink, who stood with a lantern.

"Cool him down, don' let no hahm come to him or I'll skin you alive!" he ordered. "Give me that lantah . . . git youahse'f anothah one!"

"Yas, suh, Mastah!" he heard Wink gasp, then charged along the path to the tool shed. He grabbed a shovel, doused the lantern and made for the lane leading to the swampland. Even though it wasn't raining tonight, and he had made it a rule never to dig up gold unless it rained so he would run less risk of being seen, he now

had to have another three thousand dollars or so to meet the upcoming increased reward promises.

Because he was in a rush, he stopped at the first hiding place. He lighted the lantern, swept aside the concealing growth and sticks and began to dig.

When he had gone far enough, and his shovel did not touch iron, he held the lantern over the hole and stared, not believing. He set the lantern down and dug again, deeper and wider. But there was no pot of gold. He checked and rechecked the exact location, but there was no mistake. This was the spot he had always used, that his father before him had used, and the gold was gone.

He rushed to the second hiding place and repeated the digging, and that pot, too, was gone. Rage licked up in him, flared and blazed. He snatched up shovel and lantern and ran madly for Lida's cottage.

He burst in, bellowing. "Lida, git out heah! Don' wait foah no clo'es . . . git movin'!"

He smacked the lantern down on the kitchen table, slammed the earth-stained shovel beside it. Already she was running into the room, wearing her white night shift.

"Leel" she cried. "What's wrong?"

He saw her eyes go to the shovel on the table, saw them widen, and he knew for sure. "It was you!" he raged. "You dug up my gold! Wheah is it?"

Now the tawny eyes came to him levelly; she looked back at him, he recognized, even though the red mists of his anger, for the first time as if she were his equal. As if she were a lady, a born and bred lady, not one hanging on the edges of his life, scrambling to persuade him to make her into a real lady.

"You got no call to accuse me of such a thing," she said quietly. "How'd I even know you was missin' any gold?"

"'Cause youah the one suspected I dig on'y when it's

rainin'!" he shouted. "You've spied on me, an' you're dug up fohty-seven thousan' dollahs of my gold!"

"It ain' rainin' tonight," she pointed out. "How come you know it's missin'?"

"I dug 'cause I need moah rewahd foah that run-away!" he shouted. "It's gone, an' I say you stole it."

"Le's jus' say I did steal it," she said. She held her hand up as he started for her. "Stan' still! Now. I ain' sayin' I stole it, min' you. But s'pose I did, Cousin Lee. S'pose I said if you git rid of that Yankee bride an' make me mistress of Hunnicutt Hill like you should of done long ago, I'll make you a kin' of weddin' gift of that fohty-seven thousan' dollahs, an' that if you don' make me youah wife, you ain' nevah see that gold or me ag'in long as you live!"

With a wordless shout he was on her, beating her around the face, the neck, shoulders, breasts. When he had finished, she was lying on the floor, conscious and moaning.

He grabbed his lantern and shovel and charged out, this time going deeper into the swamp. Here he dug up his third pot, found the gold to the brim as he had last seen it, counted out three thousand dollars, re-buried the pot. Then he hurried to Slocum's cottage and knocked until the overseer came to the door.

Standing in the predawn darkness, he told Slocum about his missing gold. "Lida stole it, I'm satisfied," he ended. "What I want you to do is follow huh evah time she comes outside. If she's hid it someplace, she'll go to it, soon's she kin. I wan' to know wheah it is. I wan' to recovah it myse'f an' avoid the scandal of callin' in the law on my own blood. I'd suggest you get a couple trustees an' staht watchin' right now."

CHAPTER 37

ROYAL covered the last mile at an easy gallop, his left hand holding the rifle, his half-numb right hand managing the reins. He rode with knees pressed against the horse's sides, the troublesome right leg not as secure as the other.

His blood coursed at a steady, pulsing surge. So far he'd met no other horseman, no carriage, on the river road. The only movement had been an occasional boat and once a steamboat, plying the stream.

Ahead was the lane which led to the plantation house. He reined in, turned right, and kept the horse at a quiet walk.

The oaks lining one side of the lane provided him with blackness, hence no one could see him. The horse's hooves set down in the cushioning dust, made scarcely any sound.

The great black block of the plantation house stood just ahead. He alit, tied the reins around a small oak branch, then stood peering ahead and listening. There was no light anywhere; the deep silence pulsed only with the song of swamp frogs and the surge and splash of the river tide. He wondered suddenly how the insurrection plot was going.

Rifle in hand, he covered the distance to the front gallery. That leg was working better. Maybe the addlement was fading from his brain with the numbness from his side. Maybe his skull was too thick to let

his brain addle like that of a white man, say. He soft-footed around the house, grass cushioning his feet, and silently climbed the outside stair to the upper gallery.

He eased along the gallery to the mistress' room. The first tall window was open, the white glass curtains not stirring. He parted them and stepped into the room.

He could only trust that Princess still slept here. He could only hope the mistress would still help him, if she roused.

He came to the foot of the big bed. Someone lay sleeping on the daybed; the delicate musk told him it was Princess.

He stooped, put his lips to her ear, whispered.

She came instantly awake, sat up and put her hand in his. He tugged gently, and she stood down on the carpet and when he moved for the window, moved with him. They slipped along the gallery, down the steps, across the grass and down the lane, Royal's shoes making the smallest of sounds, her bare feet noiseless in the dust.

"The horse," Royal whispered, "he's tied neahby!"

Through the inky shadows they fled, and there was the horse. Royal came to a jolting halt, yanking Princess back so hard she almost fell.

There were shadowy figures around the horse, three of them.

The overseer's voice bellowed, "Stop! Stop, or I'll shoot!"

CHAPTER 38

ROYAL turned, hauling Princess with him, and bolted back the way they had come, passing the house, the stable, making for the road that led to the swamp. He ran as he would have run if he had been alone, and Princess kept up with him. He threw back his head and ran; beside him she ran. They raced like two wild animals through the jungle.

Royal could hear Slocum and the trustees give chase. The horse, he thought, the horse can catch us! He poured on speed, pulling Princess now. Down the road he pounded, through the ebon shadows of tree and bush, through the frog-beating, inky night, making for the bend which curved to Lida's cottage. The shouts were louder behind them, but he was unable to tell whether anyone was pursuing on the horse. Around the bend he fled, and there was Lida's cottage, a light in the kitchen at this early hour, Lida herself standing in the doorway looking out.

Slocum went at a slogging run around the bend after the runaway slave and the wench, cursing mentally that he hadn't jumped onto the horse. No matter, he'd get the niggers.

He rounded the bend in time to see them dart into Lida's kitchen. He rushed across the yard and burst into the kitchen, the trustees at his heels just as she

snatched a rifle away from the runaway stud and whirled.

She had the damn gun pointed right at Slocum's belly. "Don't move!" she cried. "What's goin' on, heah—whose house you think youah breakin' into, Mistah Slocum?"

He stared at the tawny girl in the warm lamplight and cursed. The only reason he hadn't yet dug up the gold and taken her and left, was he'd not yet had time to inform Hunnicutt that he was needed to run his brother's farm in Alabama. Else him and Lida, too, would by now be long gone and Hunnicutt with never a suspicion of his ex-overseer.

Even with the rifle on him, he made his dicker. "What you want, Miss Lida?" he asked.

"I want you to git out!"

"You want the nigger to go free?"

"An' if I do, is it youah business?" she demanded.

"I'm Mister Hunnicutt's overseer," he reminded her. "It's my duty to ketch his runaway."

"Well, you can't!" she retorted. "'Cause I've got the gun!"

"And you've got the gold," he said very softly.

He saw her tawny lashes blink, her tawny eyes go amazed, then thoughtful.

"I'll make a deal," he said. "I'll let the nigger go . . . fer a price."

"What price?"

"You. And the gold you got buried. I watched you; I know where it is. I've been followin' you all along on Mister Hunnicutt's orders," he lied, "not jest tonight." He watched the impact of his words hit her. She believed him. "I want you as my wife," he continued, "as Missus Sam Slocum, traveling to Paris, big spenders, having the time of our lives."

He saw that she was wavering. He glanced at

Princess, nubile in her thin shift, and his passion stirred. "The nigger's to leave the wench behind," he pressed. "We'll take her with us as yer maid."

Lida stared at him, mind racing. She had no chance at all now with Lee. He'd hound her, take the gold away from her if she fooled around, maybe even have her stuck away in prison. If she took Slocum up on his proposition here and now, they'd get away with the gold and she'd be a respectable married woman with fine clothes and high living. Slocum would be presentable after she got him slicked up. They'd make a handsome pair.

She frowned suddenly. Now that she'd seen Royal again, she hated to lose him as stud. However, the way things were, Lee knowing she had the gold, and her having only two pots instead of the whole thing, she couldn't take Royal and Slocum both.

She wasn't taking the wench, either. If Slocum was going to marry Lida he had to be all hers, not partly another woman's even if the woman wasn't anything but a wench.

"All right," she said, "it's a deal. On'y the wench don' go. I know what ails you, I see you gittin' big foah huh this minute. So git huh out of youah system, 'cause when weah mabhied, youah min' an' min' alone. Go on, take huh in the bedroom."

She blinked at the swiftness with which he moved to Princess, his big hands coming down on her shoulders, pushing her toward the bedroom. Before they had gone a step, she saw Royal throw his great body across the space, saw him hurl his brawn upon the white man and send him crashing to the floor.

She clutched the rifle and stared as they rolled, slugging and kneeing and gouging and grunting. She knew Princess was standing tense and frozen, that one of the trustees, the one named Cat, fled into the night and

that the other one, Bone, stood with his mouth hanging open. She knew he was shaking, terror stricken at what the white master would do to him for his inaction, yet powerless without orders from the overseer, to lay hands on Royal who was his own kind, and hold him captive to be tortured and killed.

Lida's hands were shaking; the rifle was literally shimmying. Somehow she kept it pointed at the men on the floor. She couldn't aim at Royal and pull trigger and be sure she'd hit him and not the white man.

Then Royal was on top of Slocum, straddling him, his great black hands around the overseer's neck, his big thumbs sinking into the windpipe. The stud's back was to her; all she had to do was pull trigger. The rifle jerked; her knees went weak and it was all she could do to keep from sinking to the floor.

Royal got slowly to his feet, still straddling the body of the overseer. The bullet had gone into Slocum's nose and upward, toward the brain. The trusty, Bone, stared at the overseer, his eyes big and white, his big underlip hanging and jerking.

"He daid!" Bone whispered. "The mastah'll blame me! We bof in dis, boy," he said to Royal. "We got to run!"

"Not yet you don't!" Lida cried. "I'm gittin' out of heah, an' you goin' with me, Royal. You two goin' to dig up my gold. Bone, if you'll he'p, you kin go along with us. It youah bes' chancel!"

So scared his musk filled the room, Bone nodded.

Royal stepped to Princess. "I'm taking her, Miss Lida," he said. "I jumped this white man to keep him from vi'rating her again. And now he's dead, and I'll be blamed. I'll help dig up youah gold, and I'll go with you if you say, but I'm taking Princess.

Lida stared, stunned at his defiance. Then she knelt beside Slocum, rifled his body of amunition, set the

stock on the gun on the floor and reloaded. Into the rim of her hearing came sounds, faint but distinct, from the plantation house.

"That trustee . . . that Cat!" she cried. "He went to Leel Theah aftah us . . . we got to run!"

"Not you, Miss Lida," Royal said. "Just us. They won't do anything to you!"

"Lee will—you don' know him! He'll take one look an' say I had you kill Mistah Slocum 'cause he foun' out wheah I buried the gold! Theah's an' ol' cave—we'll hide theah!"

Running, carrying the rifle, she sped out of the house and into the swamp. Far away she raced, the others behind her. At last she doubled across and back, led them into a running creek, waded down it a long distance, parted some bushes, stooped and entered the cave, the others at her heels. There, in the damp, hot darkness, she turned.

"We'll hide heah till the search leaves the plantation," she whispered. "The dogs won' trace us on'y fah's the creek, an' if weah lucky they'll follow the creek away f'um heah, seekin' ouah spoah. Lee don' know 'bout this cave—he gave ohdahs to fill it in ten yeahs ago, an' the lazy niggahs nevah done it. I tol' 'em not to, that it wasn' no use to do that wu'lk an' I'd nevah tell the mastah, so they's glad not to. Lee nevah foun' out. We'll git the gold," she panted, "an' we'll git away. I'll be the mistress an' you'll be the slaves . . . we kin do it . . . we got to do it!"

CHAPTER 39

FRANCES was roused by Lee's thunderous knock at her door followed by his bursting in. "Git up, Frances . . . we got guests downstairs!" he cried. She sat up, bewildered. The room was black-dark. She could hear him fumbling at a small table; in seconds a match flared and he was holding it to the wick, fitting the chimney into place. "Hurry!" he urged. "I got a seahch pahty to go aftah that niggah . . . we flushed him out in New Orleans. I rode foah home fas' as I could, rousin' neighbors on the way . . . then I dug foah my gold, an' two pots is missin! The neighbors arrivin' now, an' I wan' 'em greeted propah."

"Why do you think Royal would come here?" Frances asked, reaching for her clothes.

"That wench . . . that Princess is whyl" Lee snapped. "An' because he ain' got bettah sense! It ain' logical, but I nevah saw a niggah that was logical, so I'm makin' a seahch . . . jus' in case."

He moved about the room restlessly, suddenly went tense. "Wheah is she?" he demanded. "Wheah is the wench?"

"I . . . don't know!" Frances gasped, only now aware that Princess was missing. She buttoned her dress, began to put on her slippers. Her heart raced. Now that she was really awake, she detected a smell of muck in the room. Then Royal had been here . . . he had come

for Princess. They had slipped away together as she slept.

She was happy over this small blessing. Her sorrow over Happ's execution for something she had done had eaten at her for weeks. Her guilt had deepened steadily.

"Come on!" Lee ordered. "Youah haih looks finel"

She followed him downstairs to the parlor. The cave, she thought, surely they'll go there if they need to! It's their only chance against the dogs unless they have a horse.

Two men, the venerable Harold Vannice of Rivercane, and young Billy Owens of Owens Place, came to her as she entered.

"Madam," said Vannice, bending over her hand. "It is an imposition . . . fohgive us!"

"It is a favor you do my husband," she replied.

"Madam," said Owens, taking his turn over her hand. "It a scandalous houah foah us to intrude, no mattah what the circumstances!"

"I've sent Wink down to wake Slocum ag'in an' tell him to bring the houn's," Lee told his neighbors. "He gave each of them a pistol and tucked one into his own waistband, passed around ammunition. "Hettie's fixin' coffee an' cakes so we'll have somethin' in ouah stomachs. I hate to rush you gent'men, but I'm in a hurry to ketch that niggah if he's in these pahts. We also got a wench missin, one that came f'um his same tribe."

The men nodded and murmured. Frances listened for first sound of the dogs; the longer that sound was delayed, the better start Royal and Princess would get.

Why, she wondered, oh why did he come here? Why didn't he try for Boston and trust me to bring Princess?

Even as she thought thus, a heavy pounding came at the back of the house, and the three men went alert. Lee started for the door. "It's likely some of the othah neighbors," he said.

But before he could leave the room, Ginger the cook was in the doorway, excitement quivering her voice. "It Cat . . . youah trusty," she said. "He got news 'bout that runaway!"

"Bring him in!" Lee ordered. He turned to the others. "This confuhms my reasonin'!" he declared.

Cat was sobbing and blubbering as he came along the corridor, and the moment he stood in the parlor, his sobs and tremendous, jerking breaths filled the room with noise. His eyes were big and white; his big lower lip was quivering and jerking, and great tears were coursing down his face.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Lee demanded. "What you know 'bout them runaway blacks? Tell it, an' tell fast!"

"Dey at Miss Lida's, Mastah!" blubbered the trusty. "Mistah Slocum, he daid . . . don' blame Cat, Mastah . . . please don' blame Cat!" His words broke in a guttural wail.

"Hell fiah!" shouted Lee. "Talk, or I'll have you whipped till you kin talk!"

"Mistah Slocum 'us watchin' Miss Lida's house," yammered Cat. "Me an' Bone 'us with im, an' we come up to de plantation house to see if she 'us prowlin' this way. An' we see dat runaway niggah come ridin' on a hoss. He git off de hoss an' leave him at de head of de lane to de big road, an' he go to de house. An' when he come back, he got dat Princess wench wif him, an' us an' Mistah Slocum 'us waitin' at de hoss. An' dey run, an' we chase 'em to Miss Lida's, an' she let 'em in, an' dat nigga got a gun and he kilt Mistah Slocum! Cat run, an' he fall down an' can' git up till now he so scaihed, an' he come tell you! But Cat didn't kill nobody, Mastah! Cat didn' kill Mistah Slocum!"

"Oh shut up, you black bastahd!" Lee shouted.

Frances stared at her bridegroom, her pulse so fast she could scarcely breathe.

"Go git the dogs!" Lee shoted. "Tell Wink . . . he'p him bring 'em! He's down at Slocum's now! Or kin you manage that?"

"Yas, Mastahl!" jibbered Cat, shaking still but making a visible effort to redeem himself. "Mistah Slocum bin showin' Cat how to manage de dawgs . . . he go right now!"

"Bring 'em to the back doah," Lee ordered. "Soon's we drink ouah coffee, we'll give 'em the scent f'um the wench. Frances," he continued, "git a paiah of slippahs the wench woah. They good foah scent."

She fled upstairs. She was trembling with shock and urgency. Princess would be in her night shift, barefoot. She couldn't travel like that.

Frances bundled undergarments, dress, shoes and stocking for the girl. She tucked her small hoard of gold into her bosom. If there was fleeing done tonight from his horrible, wicked plantation, the mistress was going to be among those escaping.

She returned to the parlor, where the men were gulping their coffee, and laid the bundle on a chair. "I brought a set of clothes," she said, "so the dogs can get a strong scent."

"Thank you kindly, mah deah," Lee said absently, setting down his cup. He took the bundle and, followed by the other men, went to the back gallery, where Wink, returned from the overseer's cottage, stood with lanterns lighted, ready for use.

As Frances stepped onto the gallery, the hounds, yelping and baying, lunging forward on their leashes, were pulling Cat roughly along. Hunnicutt darted out and retrieved the leashes from the trusty.

"Git back, git in the bahn!" he snarled to Cat. "Sim-mah down!" He wheeled on Wink. "Kin you han'le these houn's?" he demanded.

"Yas, suh," admitted the stableman. "A little."

"I kin, suh," volunteered young Owens. "I relieve ouah ovahseer at the dogs frequently. It a spoht I enjoy. I'd be happy to take 'em, suh."

"Take them an' thanks," Lee said.

The hounds nosed Princess' garments and lingered over her slippers. Then the party of three white men and one black went off into the darkness. The hounds circled the house, picked up the scent at the front gallery, followed it to the head of the lane, bactracked to the lane which led to Lida's cottage.

Frances stood on the gallery until they were gone, until the still lamenting Cat had crept into the stable and Ginger was again in her kitchen. Only then did she snatch up the bundle of Princess' belongings and run for the lane herself.

Ahead, the dogs were silent, which meant they were following scent. Now they bayed with a triumphant note, fell silent again. Frances gauged her progress by the dogs, going swiftly along the lane, her slippers noiseless in the dust.

She passed Lida's cottage, where a light was burning, but saw no movement within. The search party was ahead and to one side; the dogs were baying constantly now.

They've followed the spoor to the creek, she thought, which means Royal and Princess are in the cellar! If only they had remembered to walk the creek. But they had, of course they had; they wouldn't forget such a vital thing.

She turned out of the lane and made her way through swamp growth toward the cave-cellar. Cautiously she moved from tree to clumb, everlistening to the hounds. Frogs croaked all around, an orchestra of frogs making a backbeat to the melody of the hounds. The smell of the swamp was heavy and hot and lush.

The song of the dogs was coming nearer, toward

the back of the cellar. She began to run, her only thought to warn Royal and Princess, to get them safely away, to escape with them.

She stumbled down the cellar steps. "Stop!" cried a woman's voice. "Whoevah you are . . . stop! I've got a gun heah, an' I'll use it!"

Frances stopped. "It's Frances Hunnicutt," she said. "I'm going with you! I think Lee knows about the cellar . . . the dogs are coming to the other end . . . we've got to run!"

She sensed their movement toward her, caught Royal's musk. She was fleeing up the steps, the others rushing softly behind her, when the shot rang out and from back there a husky cry sounded and the thudding of a body hitting the steps.

Lee's voice rang out, "Stop! The whole damned passel of you . . . stop!"

Frances whirled. There was light in the cellar now; she took in the scene with one swift, encompassing look.

Lee stood at the far end, lantern in one hand, pistol in the other. Behind him loomed Vannice, pistol in hand, and beyond him Wink and at the very back young Owens holding the lunging hounds. The dogs were baying and yelping, filling the cellar with noise.

At the foot of the steps lay Bone. He was writhing and blood was pouring from his shoulder. On the bottom step stood a tawny-haired girl with a rifle. Next to the girl stood Royal, his arm around Princess.

For only an instant the tableau held. Then Lee thrust his pistol at Vannice. "Give me youahs, suh," he said. "An' reload this."

While they were making the transfer, Frances pushed past the others, jumped across Wink's squirming figure, and rushed toward her husband. "Nol" she cried. "You're not to shoot . . . you're not to kill!"

"She's right, Cousin Leel" the tawny girl cried. "You

not to kill, an' you not to intahfehel I got a gun says sol"

But Lee was raising his pistol, and Royal would be his target. Desperately Frances threw herself bodily upon her husband's right arm, bearing it down, grabbing for the weapon.

He jerked his arm and she twisted and fought, clinging to him with all her strength. He yanked again, and somehow the barrel of the pistol gouged her collarbone. There was a report, followed by a slamming thud and instant numbness, and she was falling and Lee was crying, "Frances . . . oh, my God!"

She was aware, as she sank to the floor, that Royal hurtled across the cellar and slammed Lee down onto his back and began to beat him. She glimpsed Lida, rifle aimed, advancing on Vannice, and then her eyes closed and she fought for consciousness, fought against that spreading numbness, against the wetness that grew around it.

There was sound and smell of struggle. There was Lida crying, "Stop it, Royal . . . leave Lee be . . . he's almost dead! No you don', you Owens boy—drop that pis—"

There was a double report, a cry from Lida. There was continued fighting and the struggle for consciousness, the floating in and out—from blackness to light—to blackness.

Sometime in eternity there was Royal, breathing hard. "I got the men all tied up," he was saying, "and the dogs all killed, like you said. You able to get up, Miss Lida?" There was a low moan. Then he asked, his voice anxious, "Princess, can Miss Frances get up?"

Frances felt hands on her, tender, staunching her wound. Princess' hands. She heard Princess ask if Royal was wounded, heard him say he was grazed on one hip from earlier in the evening, and then she went again into the blackness.

Later, as from a great distance, she heard Lida say, "That's wheah it's all buried, Royal. Git it all an' bring it, an' we'll go. If you he'p me, I kin walk."

Later still, Princess was sobbing. "She's dead, Royal," Princess was saying. "Miss Lida died while you were gone. What are you going to do with the gold?"

Frances opened her eyes. "Help me," she said. "We'll take the gold and go—the three of us."

She saw Royal stoop to lift her, saw Princess lay her hand on his arm.

"She not able to go," Princess said. "And I can't leave her. You'll have to run alone."

CHAPTER 40

"BUT I came back for you!" Royal cried.

"I must stay with the mistress," she said.

He examined the mistress' wound. "It's clean . . . she'll live."

"I must stay and nurse her, as she nursed me."

"The master won't die, either."

He became aware that the mistress was looking at him. "Take the gold," she whispered. "Take it and go."

"Do what she says," Princess said. "Go to Boston. Get on the horse and go!"

"After a month," Frances whispered weakly, "go to the docks every Sunday morning at ten. I'll bring her to you there, one Sunday morning."

Princess urged him to the bags of gold, which he'd set on the cellar steps. He lifted all the bags but one small one.

"Hide it for you and the mistress to use when you travel," he said. "I'll keep the rest safe for her."

He kissed Princess, looked once at the trussed-up men. They were beginning to stir.

In two strides he was up the cellar steps and going for the lane.

EPILOGUE

RIDING north of New Orleans at dawn, Royal assumed an air of assurance which he was far from feeling. There had been, to his knowledge, no pursuit. Some miles from the plantation, he had alit and brushed his suit, hoping it would look presentable, if not for city streets, at least for travel by horseback. He had passed only one carriage and two horsemen. No one had accosted him.

At this moment the road was deserted. A small road wound to the left, leading to a small farm, and he turned on to it. The stiffness was leaving his side and his brain was clearing; he could plan ahead and act on his plans.

He urged the horse to a lope, and like that he arrived at the farmhouse, where the farmer, a stringy-haired white, stepped out of the kitchen door and regarded him suspiciously.

"Morning," Royal said, taking the initiative. "I'm hungry, suh. Could I buy breakfast from youah wife?"

A stringy-haired woman appeared at the man's shoulder. A number of stringy children clustered around her. She whispered to her man, then they both looked suspicious.

"You want to see my arrival papers?" Royal asked, bluffing. The old slaves on the plantation had said that many poor whites could no more read and write than could the slaves. He thrust his freedom paper

at the man. "You'll see my name theah," he explained, "and that I arrived in New Orleans yesterday by ship. From the islands," he continued, "wheah I raise pine-apples. I'm ridin' to Boston to visit my brother, who left the islands years ago."

The man handled the paper, gave it to his woman, and she handled it. The man returned it to Royal.

"Don' cotton to readin' early in the mawhnin'," he said. "Reckon the ol' woman kin give you a pack of pone an' fatback to eat as you ride."

"That's good," Royal smiled. "You got a horse I can buy? I'll let you have this one and pay cash. Double if you got a saddle."

The man considered, then slouched to a leanto stable. After a few moments he emerged leading a bay which looked a bit better than the horse Royal had stolen. The saddle was shabby but sound.

"How much?" Royal asked.

"Hundred dollahs gold, an' youah hoss."

"That's twice what it's worth," Royal said quietly.

The suspicion instantly returned to the farmer's face; his wife's suspicion doubled. With a small surge of blood, Royal forced a shrug, pulled out a handful of gold pieces.

"I'm in a hurry to see my brother," he said easily, "and you are doing me a favor. So . . . a hundred and my horse."

The farmer reached for the gold, with suspicion still on him

"You got whiskey?" Royal asked, inspired. "It's worth five dollars more to me for a jug of whiskey."

Suspicion fled from the farmer and wife—slowly, but it fled. The woman disappeared into the house. By the time Royal had counted one hundred and five dollars into her husband's hand to her husband's satisfaction, the woman emerged with the bundle of food in one hand and the whiskey jug in the other.

Royal fastened the jug and his rifle to the saddle. He mounted his new horse, keeping his manner unconcerned, stowed away his packet of food. If these two had heard of a runaway slave at all, they'd very likely tell each other, "No runaway niggah with ten thousand dollahs on his haid is goin' to ride a saddled hoss in a good suit, with a gun an' a five dollah jug of whiskey!"

His blood at its highest surge, he lifted his hand in farewell. Then, smiling, he turned his horse toward Boston . . . toward Africa . . . toward the middle plateau.